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Participation in Climate Change Adaptation Programs in Nepal: An Intersectional Study

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Abstract In the social discourses of climate change, women are perceived both as vulnerable victims and as active players in adaptation. These perceptions of women along with inclusion policies have led climate change adaptation programs to seek women's participation. However, 'women' is not a homogenous category. Intra-gender power differences in terms of castes and ethnicities can play an important role, especially in Nepal with its long history of institutionalized disparities. Using qualitative methodology, this study explores the relationships between gender, caste and ethnicity in shaping women's participation in climate change adaptation programs in the southern plains of Nepal. We conclude that women's gender identities generally facilitated their participation and that affirmative action for marginalized groups, to some extent, gave women from these groups spaces to participate in climate change adaptation programs. However, power relations associated with caste/ethnic identity created hindrances for marginalized women, implying that they had more restricted access than women from the majority groups.

Keywords: Climate change adaptation; gender; caste; ethnicity; Nepal; Dalit; Sonaha; intersectionality

Introduction

Gender has become a dominant topic in social discourses on climate change. Women are often depicted as victims; more likely to be harmed by climate change-induced disasters than men. At the same time, they are seen as key actors in climate change adaptation due to their roles as managers of natural resources (Tanjeela and Rutherford, 2018). Thus climate change adaptation (CCA) programs emphasize the need for women's participation. Many programs develop specific strategies to include women in their initiatives. However, gender is not the sole social category playing a role in determining vulnerability and adaptability to climate change. Hence, there is a need to investigate a broader spectrum of social positions that determine access to CCA programs, programs that aim to enhance climate change adaptability through, for example, livelihood diversification and disaster preparation. Participation in these programs is vital not only to learn climate change adaptation skills but also to

boost leadership abilities and to cultivate networks that might improve personal and/or economic standings. To investigate access and participation across social groups, this article will apply an intersectionality framework to explore the ways gender and social categories such as caste and ethnicity interact in shaping women's participation in CCA program.

The intersectionality framework originated in critical race theory and has been developed in feminist scholarship to combat the inadequacies of feminism and anti-racism to fully explain the experiences of marginalized women. Instead of focusing on one or two oppressive categories, intersectionality focuses on 'the interwoven nature of these categories and how they can mutually strengthen or weaken each other' (Winker and Degele, 2011, p. 51).

The intersectionality framework is especially interesting in the context of Nepal because of its diverse population composed of more than 125 different castes and ethnicities (CBS, 2011). The minority castes and ethnic groups were historically subjugated to institutional discrimination of which the impact can be observed to the present day (Adhikari and Samford, 2013; Tamang, 2009). To address this, GESI (Gender Equality and Social Inclusion) is practiced in Nepal. GESI is a policy to address multidimensional poverty, gender inequality, exclusion and vulnerability. GESI has been implemented by the government of Nepal since the 1970s. It encompasses Nepal's various social groups such as Dalits, Madhesis, Muslims and various ethnic groups and drives the social and economic inequality discourse in Nepal (Copp, 2020). GESI often takes the form of affirmative action where certain groups are allocated seats for example, in community institutions. For participatory programs, GESI requires 1/3 of members to be female, female representation in leadership positions and that members be proportionate to the local population diversity. The objective of GESI is to emphasize the participation of women and marginalized individuals to foster their inclusion in 'development'. GESI is extensively practiced in Nepal. Government organizations such as the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development, and the Ministry of Education have their GESI guidelines. It is also mandatory for most development partners and INGOs (International Non-Governmental Organizations) to address GESI (GESI Working Group, 2017).

In Nepal, the term 'GESI' is sometimes used instead of 'feminism' (Copp, 2020). This invokes the intersectional criticism of 'mainstream' feminism which questions to what extent feminism (i.e. GESI) can address the problems of all women. Inspired by the work of scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, this study takes an intersectional perspective to study women's participation in CCA programs. Crenshaw highlighted how women of colour in the USA were overlooked by policies for women (mostly focused on white females) as well as policies for black people (mostly focused on black males) (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013). We question whether a similar situation is found in Nepal. GESI seeks to include women and marginalized groups, but does it overlook women of marginalized groups?

Given the social disparity in Nepal and the affirmative action targeting women and marginalized groups, our article sets out to explore how women's castes/ethnic identities and the power differences associated with them impact women's access to CCA programs. We argue that being a woman facilitates participation in CCA programs; however, not all women can access this participation equally.

Study context

The study upon which this article is based was conducted in Rajapur municipality; Province 5 of Nepal in autumn 2019. Rajapur is located in the southern plains of Nepal known as *Terai*. Bordering India on its southern side, Rajapur is a primarily agricultural area. Surrounded by two rivers, Karnali and Geruwa on its eastern and western borders, Rajapur frequently faces floods during the monsoon season. Rajapur is home to approximately 55,500 people of different castes and ethnicities. The largest caste/ethnic group is the Tharus (79.6%) followed by Brahmins/ Chhetris (10.5%). Dalits form the third-largest caste/ethnic group (4.14%) (Rajapur Municipality Office, 2019). Rajapur was chosen as the study site because of its heterogeneous population and its susceptibility to climate change given its dependence on natural resources and the frequency of floods.

The research on which this article is based is a qualitative study exploring women's access to climate change adaptation programs in the community. The study has focused mainly on two marginalized groups: the Dalit caste and the Sonaha ethnic group. In addition, we have interviewed some members of the majority group in the community, the Tharu ethnic group.¹ The inclusion of the majority group in the research was used to contrast their experience with that of the non-majority study participants. This article will focus particularly on women of Dalit and Sonaha groups who have not participated in CCA programs, to try and understand the reasons behind their lack of participation.

Although caste-based discrimination has been illegal in Nepal since 1954, Dalits continue to be socially excluded due to the cultural and religious connotations associated with the Dalit identity. A study conducted in 2002 found that a host of discriminations against Dalits were still being practiced (Tamang, 2011). Extreme forms of social discriminations such as untouchability and prohibition from entering public spaces seem to continue in many parts of Nepal. Dalits are significantly below the

1 Tharus are not the majority group in Nepal. Only 6.8% of the total Nepali population are Tharus (CBS, 2011). In the context of Nepal, Tharus would also not normally be considered an elite group. Historically, even in Rajapur, despite being the majority group, Tharus were not an elite group. They were landless and worked as *Kamaiyas* (bonded labourers). Many Tharus still live as landless *Mukta-Kamiyas* (freed ex-Kamaiyas). However, based on my experiences during the fieldwork, in the present context of Rajapur, they could be considered an elite group (along with Brahmins and Chhetris), for they also hold economic and political power.

national average in most development indicators such as poverty, literacy, chronic childhood malnutrition, food deficiency and life expectancy (CBS, 2011). Dalits have been classified as a 'historically marginalized group' and are eligible for affirmative action from the Constituent Assembly for various community-based institutions. In Rajapur, most Dalit families are involved in farming. While many do not own enough land for farming, they follow a system of *bataiya* (a system where landless households, particularly in the southern plains of Nepal, cultivate the lands for its owners in exchange for a part of the land's yield). As Rajapur borders India, seasonal migration to India is common for Dalit men. They usually work in India during agriculturally non-intensive months and return to Rajapur during the cultivating and harvesting periods.

The Sonaha ethnic group has not been officially recognized by the government of Nepal. They often do not appear in the national census or in the documents produced by the Rajapur municipality. The Sonahas themselves estimate that their total population is around 1,200 living in Rajapur and a few other areas in the southern plains of Nepal. Officially, the Sonahas have been grouped together with the Tharu ethnic group. However, they hold a distinct identity based on culture, language, profession and religion. Interestingly, the Sonahas in Rajapur represent a pocket of Christianity in the dominantly Hindu country of Nepal. Additionally, most Sonaha men (unlike men of other caste and ethnicity in Rajapur) have not migrated outside of the village for work but are still involved in their traditional profession. Many also work around the village area. The most distinct aspect of the Sonaha identity is perhaps their profession. Living at the banks of the Karnali river, the Sonahas pan for gold in the river islands. Aside from panning for gold, the Sonahas are also known for their skills in fishing. Unlike other castes and ethnic groups, who might fish as well, the Sonahas do not own lands and do not farm (besides what they can cultivate in their backyards). For the Sonahas, the Karnali river is a vital part of life. Most Sonahas are extremely strong swimmers; able to swim across the entire breadth of the Karnali river against its strong currents.

Sonahas are currently facing a threat to their traditional ways of living through conservation laws such as The National Park Act and Animal Protection Act 2029 which aims to protect wildlife and thus restricts Sonahas from fishing and panning for gold in certain areas (Thing et al., 2017). While the constitution does protect indigenous peoples' right to practice their traditional occupation, this is not applicable to the Sonahas as they are not recognized as an ethnic group (Chaudhary, 2016).

At the onset of the research, two specific Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) programs were in focus. Both these programs were conducted by an International Non-Governmental Organization (INGO). Given that Rajapur experiences flood every year, the INGO has been conducting a flood resilience program since 2014 and a climate change project since January 2019. The INGO's local partner organization in Rajapur has been implementing these two programs which include activities such as trainings on safety and survival during floods, trainings on operation of early

warning systems for floods and courses in swimming. They also provide livelihood diversification trainings such as hospitality management, sewing and hair dressing. Interestingly, the study participants of this research categorized CCA programs and other participatory programs such as CFUGs (Community Forestry User Groups), DMCs (Disaster Management Committee) and micro-finance organizations into the same category, i.e. the category 'program'. Thus the study participants talked about them interchangeably. CFUGs are legal entities formed to manage and utilize community forests. Among other functions, CFUG committees hold meetings and make decisions on how forest resources are to be used. Similarly, DMCs are committees that conduct trainings and are active as first responders during natural disasters like floods or earthquakes. INGO programs such as CCA programs are often conducted through these committees and it is understandable why the study participants would talk about these when asked about CCA programs. In addition to examining women's participation in CCA programs, our article will, for the above-mentioned reasons, pay some attention to CFUGs and DMCs.

Data material and methods

The research on which this article is based employed a qualitative, exploratory design. The methods employed were in-depth semi-structured interviews (11 individuals), a group interview (8 individuals) and a focus group discussion (6 individuals). All interviews were carried out by the first author of this article (PR), herself a Nepalese, in the fall of 2019. Informal conversations were also conducted with people in the community. Recruitment of study participants was done through the INGO (International Non-Governmental Organization) conducting the CCA programs mentioned above. The INGO's local partner organization in Rajapur facilitated contact with community members and as such acted as gatekeeper.

The staff of the organization introduced the first author to both people who had and had not participated in CCA programs. The interviews (both individual and group interviews) were conducted in the study participants' natural settings, in the front yards of their homes. All the interviews were carried out in the Nepali language by the first author who speaks Nepali as her first language.

An FGD was also conducted with Dalit and Sonaha women, the intention behind which was to observe group dynamics and the sharing of opinions and norms while discussing CCA program participation and the social hierarchies involved. Six women, three of Dalit caste and three of Sonaha ethnicity, were invited. Only one of them had participated in CCA programs before. The Sonaha and Dalit women were comfortable speaking with and in front of each other. The FGD took place in the office of the local organization mentioned above. The NGO office was an ideal place for the FGD as it was in the central area of Rajapur and was thus accessible to all the study participants. On the other hand, because the office belonged to the organization conducting the CCA programs, some study participants felt unable to

speak as openly as they might have wanted to. However, towards the end of the focus group, we took a break for lunch in a restaurant outside of the office. The discussion continued during the lunch which allowed the study participants to speak more freely.

Informed consent and confidentiality were ensured in each step of the research process. The research project was explained in detail to the study participants. They were also offered an informed consent form in Nepali. Consent was received from all study participants in written or verbal form. All study participants involved in this research and their related information have been anonymized and the files containing personal information have been deleted. The data was analysed using Attride-Stirling's (2001) model of Thematic Network Analysis. Following the six steps prescribed for this method, the data was first coded in the Nvivo 12 program by devising a framework and then each text was dissected into text segments using the framework. Themes were subsequently abstracted from the codes.

Assessing intersectionality in climate change studies

Women's involvement in participatory natural resource management institutions such as Community Forest User Groups (CFUG) has been well studied in Nepal. Following the general trend of Nepali women's increasing participation in the public domain (Haug and Aasland, 2016) and political participation (Sijapati, 2021), researchers find that women's representation in CFUGs has also been increasing (Bhattarai, 2020). Women's increased involvement has been linked to both male outmigration and affirmative action (Bhattarai, 2020; Collins, 2017; Giri and Darnhofer, 2010; Lama et al., 2017; Leder et al., 2017). However, this mandate also seems to encourage tokenistic participation, which is a symbolic participation without power, mainly to appease the requirements (Dahal et al., 2012; Lama et al., 2017; Leder et al., 2017). It has been argued that participation is particularly tokenistic for marginalized women as they face a 'double barrier' being women as well as members of marginalized communities (Leder et al., 2017, p. 244). Meanwhile, Haug et al. (2009) in their quantitative study of multiple areas in Nepal find that rather than social identities like caste and ethnicity, district and cultural values are more strongly related to socio-political participation.

Despite a rise in women's participation, researchers find that women are unable to access leadership positions in community-based institutions (Dahal et al., 2012; Lama et al., 2017; Leone, 2019). Regardless of the sound quota system implicated in GESI, women are still missing out on decision-making processes and quotas are not always followed (Copp, 2020). Gender inclusion in local political structure also does not encourage women being voted into higher positions like mayor, chairperson, and ward-chair (Sijapati, 2021). Mahara and Dhital (2014), in their assessment of the 2009 GESI policy for health sector, find that to reduce gender inequalities in the health sector in Nepal, the focus needs to be put on caste, ethnic and religious diversity along with gender.

Some CFUGs in Nepal seem to practice male hegemony in decision-making where women committee members are unable to challenge men's decision (Bhattarai, 2020). Additionally, some studies find that decision-making positions in community adaptation programs positions are almost entirely held by men of rich and high-caste families (Regmi et al., 2016). While Bhattarai (2020) argues that women's presence in decision-making positions is rising, other research find that women's roles are undermined and their decisions are heavily influenced by their husbands or local patrons (Dahal et al., 2012; Platteau, 2009). Furthermore, women's minimal representation in decision-making roles have been linked to women's heightened climate vulnerability (Ahmed and Fajber, 2009; Sultana, 2013; Tanjeela and Rutherford, 2018).

Climate change adaptation has the potential to bring positive as well as negative changes in society (Nightingale, 2002). Studies state that adaptation programs are opportunities for transformative changes. Adaptation strategies such as livelihood diversification can be advantageous to marginalized members of society as they have an opportunity to use these interventions in social norms to embrace changes (Ogra and Badola, 2015; Sultana, 2013). However, some development programs themselves might contribute towards the reproduction of existing patterns of vulnerability and inequality by insufficiently addressing local norms and power structures as a part of adaptation processes (Bhattarai et al., 2015; Eriksen et al., 2015; Rankin, 2011). Moreover, gender boundaries tend to remain intact even in the face of natural disasters (Onta and Resurreccion, 2011). The same factors that cause vulnerability may also deepen the caste and gender divisions (Bhattarai, 2020; Cleaver, 2005; Nagoda and Nightingale, 2017). Furthermore, elite capture of resources in development programs may reinforce social inequalities in communities (Dahal et al., 2012; Gentle et al., 2013; Leder et al., 2017; Regmi et al., 2016).

Developed in the 1980s, the intersectionality framework has travelled far and wide into different disciplines such as history, philosophy, anthropology and legal studies (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013). Intersectionality is increasingly being incorporated into climate change studies as well. Intersectionality has been used in climate change studies to research how 'multiple social identities and forms of oppression, such as class, race, ethnicity, caste, sexuality and age intersect and influence environmental management, livelihood vulnerability and adaptation responses to global environment change' (Iniesta-Arandia et al., 2016, p. 389). In a reflection article by 16 climate change researchers, intersectionality is deemed as an important theoretical framework to achieve a meaningful understanding of vulnerabilities and adaptive capacities as well as a means of achieving tailored transformational changes in society (Iniesta-Arandia et al., 2016). Researchers recommend intersectionality especially in adaptation studies (Osborne, 2015; Sugden et al., 2014) to rethink the notions of vulnerability, resilience and adaptive capacities (Iniesta-Arandia et al., 2016).

Although a growing number of studies have directly or indirectly indicated the importance of intersectionality, most of these studies have been theoretical (Carr

and Thompson, 2014; Djoudi et al., 2016; Iniesta-Arandia et al., 2016; Kaijser and Kronsell, 2014; Osborne, 2015). Some empirical studies such as Ravera et al. (2016) use intersectionality to explain how men and women of different castes and localities in rural India use different adaptation measures. Onta and Resurreccion (2011) also focus on the intersectionality of caste and gender to research how social identities create social barriers which shape an individual's adaptive or maladaptive capacities. Similarly, Sugden et al. (2014) study the intersectionality of gender and class in Nepal and India to find that climate change together with male outmigration has increased marginalized women's vulnerability.

Nevertheless, there is an underrepresentation of empirical research on climate change adaptation in Nepal that employs an intersectional theoretical framework. Moreover, as will be demonstrated below, there is also a lack of research regarding officially unrecognized groups (such as the Sonahas) in climate change or natural resource management studies in Nepal. This article contributes to bridging this gap in the literature.

Gender in CCA program participation

Gender seems to be a pointedly relevant category in the study of climate change. Below, we present findings on how women in Rajapur have perceived and utilized their participation in Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) programs. First, it should be mentioned that participation in CCA programs was something that women appreciated and found attractive.

Scholars studying gender in development have often written that women have to accept double or triple burden² to be able to participate in development programs such as climate change programs (Tanjeela and Rutherford, 2018). In Rajapur, however, our study participants denied that participating in CCA programs created a 'triple burden' situation for them. Trishna, a young Tharu woman explained how women navigate different responsibilities:

Everybody [women] has understood the importance of going to different places. They [women] say, "Today I have a training". They do not feel any difficulty, if they did, they could say, "No I cannot go, I have work at home". They could just stay at home. Now, they say, "Today I have to go out, I am not going to do housework" and they go (laugh).

Trishna explained that women, including herself, enjoyed participating in meetings and trainings and she clarified that the participation roles did not interfere with

2 The concept of 'triple roles' was developed by Moser in the 1980s. Moser's Triple Roles Framework aims to analyze the gendered division of labour. Moser's framework demonstrates how women in developing countries are responsible for multiple roles simultaneously: the reproductive, productive and community roles (Fonjong & Athanasia, 2008).

women's household responsibilities. This view was shared by all the female study participants whether or not they had participated in CCA programs before.

Trishna's comment suggests that far from being a burden, community programs are a desired activity for women of Rajapur. Her statement that she would prioritize participation in these programs over traditionally prescribed tasks such as housework displays her agency in actively transforming gender roles in her community. This is encouraging for the gender equality scenario in Nepal; while women are increasingly participating in public spheres, altering norms in the private sphere are more difficult (Haug and Aasland, 2016).

The study participants discussed how exposure to different NGOs and INGOs contributed towards increased self-confidence in the public sphere. During the FGD, Devi, a Dalit woman who had not participated in CCA programs but had experience with activities such as women's cooperative groups and attending trainings, shared her experience:

'We [the women] are the ones at home, if we are called, for example here [at the FGD], we go, we learn things, right? If we go there [an event], then we know that it is, if we go there [another event], we know what we can get from there, we know that now. They [the men] say "when you go out, you know things, things important for the family". So, they say we must go out, "you must go out and learn things." If not, what do we have? Nothing, we cannot go and work, it is not enough to just stay at home, there is no other work here, what can we do? It is important for women to be active. Even if men are there, women are the ones that must participate, this is how it is now'.

All the female study participants, regardless of their castes and ethnicities, held similar perspectives as Devi. Participating in activities outside of home provided them with the opportunities to learn about available resources, gain knowledge about various topics and build their networks.

Notably, the idea of who is supposed to be involved in participating in different programs seems to have shifted in Rajapur. One of the reasons is increasing male absence due to seasonal labour migration. Affirmative action for women has also contributed to the feminization of participation roles. The introduction of affirmative action for women has made it mandatory for women to participate in different committees and programs. Tilak, a male leader of a CFUG, explained the different requirements for committees like CFUGs.

... even in the Government of Nepal ... only 1/3 are women ... among the 11 members, it is deemed enough to have 3 women. However, in the community, women should account for at least 50% of the participation ... Regarding GESI, for example, ... if the committee has 11 members, it is mandatory that the positions of either the president or the vice-president should be filled by a woman.

As Tilak explained, in community groups, at least half of the participants must be women. Additionally, one of the two leadership positions (either chairperson or the

vice-chairperson) must be a woman. When asked, Trishna shared her personal experience with me with content:

Before, women were busy with housework, they only used to do housework. They [NGOs and CSOs] started insisting that there must be participation of women as well, women must come, they must attend meetings, they must get trainings, there were many kinds of trainings, women should also learn and do something, then gradually women started participating, now women are “fast”, they have gone way far ahead.

Similarly, some of the other study participants also explained that initially, women felt compelled to participate. However, through obligatory participation, the study participants realized that these programs can be beneficial to them by opening new avenues. ‘Now’, Trishna said, ‘*women are fast*’; meaning that women had become able to grab opportunities that were advantageous for them.

Women of different castes and ethnicities, in different conversations, shared their experiences of this shift in their communities.

Now, it is not the time of men. Everywhere, there are women. (Sunehna)

Going to the committee meetings, if there is a training then going to the training, usually it is the women who go. (Sunkesari)

... before only men used to participate, now slowly we have learnt, women have learnt from others, so women have started. Otherwise, no. It was just men before. (-Drishti)

... there are women in all the places, in meetings, in any trainings or in any programs, if men are in the house, they would not want to go there at all. “It is women’s work, women are the ones who are there, if women go if it is good”. This is the kind of things that men say. Usually in our villages, women are the one who are ahead of the men. The person who is speaking, whether it is a badhghar (village chief) or leader or any chairperson, there are, indeed, one or two males but the participants are all females. This is what happens. (Sunkesari)

One of the study participants, Trishna, told me that she would like there to be trainings for women in traditionally male domains such as mechanic training and driving training. This statement signals that feminization of a traditionally male role (community participation) had encouraged women’s confidence to the extent that some felt ready to subvert traditional gender roles.

Intersectionality of gender, caste and ethnicity for participation in CCA programs

As shown above, the women of Rajapur have had the opportunities and motivations to participate in CCA programs. However as argued by Arora-Jonsson (2011), ‘Gender is important but needs to be seen in particular context ... women are not a homogenous

category. Women can be rich or poor, urban or rural, from different ethnicities, nationalities, households and families all of which produce specific results' (p. 749). Below, findings on the impact of women's caste and ethnicity for their participation in CCA programs are presented and discussed.

Affirmative action policies such as GESI (Gender Equality and Social Inclusion) guarantee places for marginalized groups in CCA programs. Drishti, a Dalit woman and a mother to a 3-year-old girl, who had previously been involved in CCA programs captured the essence of GESI when she said, '*Whatever programs they do, Dalit participants are mandatory.*' These reserved seats are not limited to Dalits but apply to all castes and ethnic groups. According to the participants of this study, all programs are required to have representations proportional to the diversity of the local populations.

If participants are sought after according to castes and ethnic groups, it raises questions concerning the inclusion of unrecognized social groups. During the FGD, the study participants were asked about their experience of being categorized as a disadvantaged group. Sonali, a young Sonaha woman, corrected the misunderstanding about the official status of the Sonahas.

Our ethnic group, actually, rather than "disadvantaged", the government does not recognize our ethnic group.

The three Sonaha women in the FGD further explained that despite having different identity markers such as language and culture, they are officially categorized as Tharu, the majority group in Rajapur. This meant that Sonahas are included in the majority group but often do not share the benefits associated with it.

Even though the study participants repeated time and again that discrimination between different castes and ethnic groups is no longer practiced, this article finds evidence of lingering implicit discriminations. During the FGD, Drishti was asked whether as a Dalit woman, she had faced discrimination in the CCA programs. Drishti hesitated to answer in the NGO office, where the NGO staff could overhear the conversation. However, after leaving the office space, Drishti opened up.

I was a member before, so they used to call me [for meetings], as soon as they found out that I went to India, they replaced me with somebody else. Now, they don't even call me for the meetings or anything. It must be because of discrimination.

Here she described how she was replaced in the leadership position while she was in India, for a month, visiting her husband. She was not consulted about the change in the position and felt that it was unwarranted as she was not in India for long. Moreover, she was disappointed that the person replacing her was not from Dalit or other marginalized communities, as she believed that it should have been. She felt additionally discriminated against since the committee had stopped informing her about meetings and other events.

While talking about society in general, we found that women claimed that caste and ethnicity-based discrimination in Rajapur had been heavily reduced in the last few years. However, in contrast to these generalized statements about non-discrimination, the women of Rajapur also discussed the unequal distribution of power in the society. For example, they talked about how some groups could manipulate scarce resources to benefit one group more than the other and how the majority groups might create situations where the marginalized groups face an unfair participation selection process. During the FGD, the Sonaha women brought up an incident that exemplifies this. In this particular incident, the NGO was conducting a skill-building training program (which was active during the time of the FGD). While the village leaders had guaranteed the Sonahas at least one place out of three, according to the Sonaha study participants, all three seats were given to Tharu women. Sonali, who had applied for and had hoped to receive the training, felt great injustice given the blatant nepotism she felt was at play. She expressed her frustration:

Decisions were already made but it was just written with a pen, it was possible to cross out names and change it, but they did not want to, because one person was the daughter of the chairperson, another was the daughter of the vice-chairperson, one was the sister-in-law of the secretary.

The unfairness of the selection process seemed to be well known in the community. Sonali explained that the decision makers declined to reconsider their decisions because the chosen candidates were their family members. Sonali continued the conversation by concisely stating the cycle of deprivation faced by marginalized communities.

Because those who have people in the bigger positions, they put their own people in it, the ones who are behind, remain behind. This is what has happened.

Although the study participants repeatedly stated that discrimination was no longer practiced, the deprivation still seemed to reproduce itself, due to elite capture of positions. Additionally, as illustrated by the quote above, the Sonahas felt ignored in the village. Sonali continued the conversation about unfair candidate selection process by explaining how the voices of the Sonahas have not been listened to. In the quote below she refers to her group as ‘small people’ which could also be a reflection how marginalized communities view themselves.

Regarding this, there has been a lot of debates, I said it earlier as well, if there is a big person ahead then they don’t listen to small people. Even when we raised the issues, we were not listened to.

As this FGD was being conducted in the NGO’s office space, one of the employees and a member of the majority group, Navin, overheard the conversation and joined in

the discussion. Navin explained how the selection of participation occurs from the perspective of the NGO.

Okay, I can explain. It is not that we do not want to give you trainings. The selection responsibility has been given to your community. We have asked them to select people who are underprivileged, people with poor economic conditions, vulnerable ... The fact that certain people have been selected and not others is the weakness of your own community.

Navin further explained how participants were selected based not on caste or ethnicity but based on vulnerability. He also listed the selection criteria for the training program in question.

Should be highly impacted by flood, houses impacted by flooding, family economic conditions should be weak, should be located inside the area that the project is working on, should have received recommendations from the community, should have application signed from related persons, able to give time for the training, should be interested in the program, should be able to organize after the completion of the training, should not have received any training or other trainings from the program, ages from 16 to 40 years old, not more than two person from one community are to be selected.

Navin, by listing the criteria of the training program, indirectly explained the organization's operationalization of 'vulnerability'. Upon hearing this, Sonali further commented that the Tharu participants who were selected for the training program did not qualify according to these criteria as they were not 'economically weak' and had received trainings before. This points towards practice of elite capture of resources. After this discussion with Navin, the Sonaha study participants seemed to come to a consensus that the NGO was not itself practicing discriminatory selection processes, but that the problems were to be found with the community leaders. Both Navin and the Sonaha women also agreed that the Sonahas were not able to get their voices heard.

Study participants from marginalised groups also raised concerns about the lack of information meaning that there were cases when people were unable to participate in programs because they were simply unaware of the programs. During the FGD, Sonali continued the topic of unfair candidate selection process and linked it the issue of control over information.

If there is a training, only people in the front know about it. We don't get the information; how can we participate?

Sonali stated that '*only people in the front*' were privy to such information. By '*people in the front*' she meant people who were able to procure the information first. Thus, it meant the community leaders, who were most likely to be Tharu men. The study participants felt that such control of information was also applicable to

endeavours conducted by the state. During the group interview, Dayakumari, a Dalit woman, shared similar experiences of lack of access to information.

Even if the government does give anything, we never know about it. They [the majority group] do not tell us. Finally, this house has been possible for some people, for some people it has not even possible.

Dayakumari explained how the house in which the group interview was being conducted was provided by the state. She further explained how the state provided them housing because Dalits are ‘historically disadvantaged and backward group’. Many Dalits in her community, including Dayakumari herself, had not been able to receive the state housing because of complications with documentation and other bureaucratic issues. Dhanmaya added, ‘*They [the majority group] do not let us know, they take it from within*’, suggesting that she believed there to be manipulation of information by majority group.

Conversations with women of marginalized communities also indicated a feeling of general lack of information. The phrase ‘*I do not know*’ was uttered multiple times by different women in different contexts. Talking about access to CCA programs, Dayakumari, said, ‘*we did not know ... we don’t know anything, such is our lives*’ and went on to compare her life to that of a frog living in a well, unaware about the world around it.

Conversations with marginalized women also indicated that manipulation in access to resources took place. Dayakumari explained her experience related to flooding events.

When it floods ... when there are any jobs from above, the Tharus take it, they do not look after our children at all ... anything happens, they do not look after us [Dalits] at all, we are just here and live here.

Discussion

Despite the success of affirmative action for women and marginalized groups and despite the women themselves stating that discrimination is no longer practiced in Rajapur, this article finds that women of marginalized groups perceive there to be discrimination based on their caste and ethnicity. This discrimination impacts women’s participation in CCA programs. Discriminations based on gender, caste and ethnicity are well known in participatory programs (Buchy and Rai, 2012; Gentle et al., 2013; Nagoda and Nightingale, 2017; Regmi et al., 2016; Tanjeela and Rutherford, 2018). This article draws parallels with other studies demonstrating that marginalized women, due to their intersectional identity might face ‘double discrimination’ (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149) and thus greater barriers to participation in CCA programs (Bhattarai, 2020; Dahal et al., 2012).

Affirmative action had partly been successful in encouraging the participation of marginalized groups in different community activities in Rajapur. This contests the existing literature which indicates that, in Nepal, affirmative action has failed in its

goals of inclusion of marginalized and disadvantaged groups (Dahal et al., 2012; Leder et al., 2017; Nagoda and Nightingale, 2017). Feminization of participation roles indicates that the government actions for the inclusion of women have been a move in the right direction. Amidst the existing literatures that highlight the failure of affirmative actions in the inclusion of women and marginalized groups, this article adds a glint of positivity that affirmative actions may encourage some positive social transformations to occur.

Affirmative action raises an issue central to the concept of intersectionality: the implications for individuals with intersecting marginalized identities. For this article, such individuals are women of marginalized groups. While GESI to some extent seems successful, we must question the extent to which the success has been the result of the affirmative action policy and the extent to which the success is the result of other factors such as male outmigration. The absence of Dalit men rather than affirmative actions may have opened possibilities for Dalit women to access the benefits of participatory programs.

Affirmative action, such as GESI, is designed for the inclusion of historically excluded groups. However, lack of accountability and susceptibility to elite capture was found to endanger the goals of affirmative action. This highlights the tensions between social transformation and resistance to social change in society. The resistance to changes and inability to participate in CCA programs may justify disparities and further exacerbate the vulnerability of the most marginalized to climate change.

Elite capture and exclusion of women and marginalized groups is well documented in the existing literature in the context of Nepal (Dahal et al., 2012; Gentle et al., 2013; Leder et al., 2017; Nagoda and Nightingale, 2017; Regmi et al., 2016; Resurrección et al., 2019). Drawing a parallel to these studies, this article also finds evidence of elite capture and manipulation of CCA programs in Rajapur. The participant selection processes for CCA programs appeared unfair to the women of marginalized groups, a manifestation of the caste and ethnicity-based discrimination as mentioned above. Marginalized women were unable to act against elite capture as they were unable to get their voices heard. Existing literature (Bhattarai, 2020; Dahal et al., 2012; Nagoda and Nightingale, 2017) support this finding. Furthermore, researchers argue that CCA programs may exacerbate patterns of disparity and vulnerability to climate change (Bhattarai et al., 2015; Eriksen et al., 2015). Similarly, in the context of Rajapur, inability to access flood survival trainings and livelihood diversification programs might mean that marginalized women would be even more susceptible to floods and other impacts of climate change.

The Sonahas, in addition to being marginalized, are not recognized by the state. In the context of Nepal's inclusion policies and rise in identity politics, this entails multiple disadvantages. This is illustrated by contrasting the Sonahas with the Dalits, a recognized disadvantaged group. Following the inclusion strategy in Nepal, 'a series of measures of positive discrimination have been enacted targeting Dalits, which include reservations in public jobs, old-age allowances, children's nutritional

allowances, etc.’ (Gellner and Adhikari, 2019, p. 5). However, Sonahas are not entitled to such reservations or positive discriminations. In addition, laws such as The National Park Act and Animal Protection Act 2029 hinder the Sonahas from practicing their traditional way of living, something which exacerbates their relative marginalization (Chaudhary, 2016; Thing et al., 2017). The restrictions to their way of life, their increasing marginalization and lack of recognition from the state could result in an erasure of the Sonaha ethnic group from the ‘diversity’ that the Nepalis have come to celebrate. However, this does not mean that the Sonahas are a passive, agency-less group. As Thing et al. (2017) discuss in their article regarding conflicts between conservation policies and the Sonahas’ rights to practice their traditional way of living, the Sonahas are active in their identity politics to get official recognition.

Access to information was important in women’s prospect of participation in CCA programs. Additionally, elite control over knowledge framed women’s participation in the programs. Other researchers, in different parts of the world, have also found evidence that local elites use manipulation and control of information (Dasgupta and Beard, 2007; Panda, 2015; Platteau, 2009). Furthermore, Colclough and Sitaraman (2005) in their research to distinguish between community and social capital find that men could prevent women from forming social capital network by withholding information. In addition, according to Jones et al. (2009) ‘being kept out of the loop is a subtle yet powerful form of stigmatization and marginalization’ (p. 171). One of the situations that Jones et al. (2009) lists as ‘being out of the loop’ is ‘having information actively shared with some people and specifically withheld from other individuals’ (p. 171). Based on the accounts of our study participants, we find indications that information such as specifics of training programs and government relief is being withheld from marginalized women, indicating that implicit discrimination is indeed being practiced in Rajapur.

Conclusion

This article aimed to explore the relationships between gender, caste and ethnicity in shaping women’s participation in CCA programs through intersectional lenses. Interactions with women and men of the majority group (Tharu ethnic group) and women of marginalized groups (Dalit caste and Sonaha ethnic group) in Rajapur, Nepal, revealed that gender, as well as caste and ethnicity, were important in framing the ability to participate in CCA programs. Gender was revealed to be an important factor in shaping women’s access to participation in CCA programs. While women seemed to have easy access to participation, intra-gender inequalities associated with caste and ethnic identity had implications on participation. Thus this article has illustrated the significance of the intersectionality framework in studying heterogeneous communities.

Women’s caste and ethnic identity did not automatically disadvantage their participation in CCA programs. Mechanisms for positive discriminations such as GESI

encouraged marginalized women's involvement in community programs. The seasonal male migration and feminization of participation roles meant that women of marginalized groups benefitted from affirmative actions in CCA programs, rather than men of marginalized groups.

From women's accounts, we also learned that affirmative action was subject to elite capture. Members of the majority group were able to manoeuvre around affirmative action by manipulating information and candidate selection processes through their positions of power, which are often unavailable to the marginalized groups. Affirmative actions were also lacking in their consideration of officially unrecognized groups. Furthermore, as evidenced by the apparent elite capture of resources, discontinuation of explicit discrimination did not necessarily entail the elimination of all forms of discrimination and exclusion.

Research on GESI policy in Nepal is limited but existing studies show some positive outcomes of the policies for women's participation and empowerment, although challenges are many (Copp, 2020; Sijapati, 2021). Our study findings equally indicate that GESI has been transformative for women. However, as our analysis demonstrates, the extent of GESI's impact on marginalized women is questionable. This further highlights GESI's weakness in addressing such groups. Based on our findings, we recommend policy makers to specifically target individuals with multiple marginalized identities to ensure their inclusion and participation, especially about programs such as CCA where access to training programs could be a matter of survival. We would also recommend NGOs conducting CCA and other participatory programs to practice a stricter mechanism to check elite capture. We recommend that this be done through more transparent information dissemination. We suggest that NGOs share information about their programs not only to local leaders and majority groups but also make an effort to share information with marginalized communities. In addition, we would recommend NGOs to double-check that their participants more carefully adhere to their guidelines concerning the inclusion of marginalized and impoverished individuals and individuals who have had not the opportunity to participate in similar programs before.

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