

## Poverty and Gender in the Eastern Gangetic Plains of Nepal: Challenges and opportunities

### Overview

The majority of farmers of the Tarai-Madhes region in Nepal struggle to make a living from low-productivity small-holdings, in a context of growing climate variability. This is a region with persistent rural poverty and deep inequalities in the distribution of resources, combined with a lack of opportunities in the local economy. This has induced significant out-migration, mostly of young men, resulting in the so-called “feminization” of the agriculture sector. While this has offered some limited economic empowerment, it does not necessarily transform gender relationships in relation to agriculture and water management in the region.

Furthermore, a review of two major irrigation-related initiatives show that these development initiatives are not tackling the huge gender inequalities in the region, despite contrary claims from the donor and government (e.g. 2013 Nepal’s Irrigation Policy). More proactive steps are needed, such as support to women’s organizations and favorable grant conditions for women, to truly enable women’s empowerment in agriculture.



RURAL WOMEN WEEDING A PADDY FIELD IN NEPAL. PHOTO BY NEIL PALMER/IWMI

### KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Conduct a series of workshops with farmers and government officials on gender and irrigation and on how political factors shape water management and farmers’ participation
- women’s participation in water user associations (WUAs) with support for income-generating activities
- Ensure vulnerable groups have a voice in irrigation institutions
- Develop special programs with allocated budgets and easy terms (e.g. no collateral) for marginalized groups: landless, women-headed households and poor farmers
- Encourage formation of women’s groups and develop specific training programs to facilitate their access to services. Allocate irrigation pumps to such groups

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Migration induced change - remittances empower some women

Migration has brought many hardships for some women, particularly through the increased workload and mental stress they face in the absence of their husbands. In spite of this, remittances are key financial resources for a majority of families left behind. These are used especially for food security and education expenses, although some funds are invested to buy land. In some cases, remittances had a positive impact on livelihoods. Some lower caste Chamar families, for example, felt empowered as remittances meant they no longer had to continue the traditional work of their ancestors (e.g. carrying dead animals). However, it can also intensify vulnerability, with households often shouldering crippling debts that were incurred when paying middlemen to send the family member abroad. Intra-household power structures can also change as a result of remittances. For some women, depending on age and household situation, migration of men can result in greater control over household decision-making and cash.

### Migration does not always mean “feminization of agriculture”

Not all women have benefited to the same degree from male out-migration. Depending on their household situation and economic status, there is a significant difference in possible outcomes for women. For those



FARMERS IN THE EASTERN TARAI OF NEPAL. PHOTO BY FRASER SUGDEN/IWMI

living with in-laws, some roles and power shift not to the wife of the migrant, but to the mother or father in law. At the same time, while growing workload is a huge challenge for the wives of migrants, those from wealthier socio-economic groups hire workers from outside to compensate for labor shortages, making the transition to a migration-based economy considerably easier. There are still strong social norms limiting women's spatial and economic mobility and preventing them from working in the public sphere. The study found that women who are left behind and take on agricultural work in place

of their husbands, without additional support, are often highly vulnerable. Replacing male roles does not translate into 'empowered women' in a society where women in the public sphere are stigmatized.

### Empowerment: women value access to cash and income-generating activities

In addition to migration, an important catalyst to change appears to be the profusion of micro-credit programs in recent years. In a few households, significant changes were observed in women's self-confidence and household decision-making as a result of



FARMERS DISCUSS ISSUES FACED BY THEIR COMMUNITY, NEPAL. PHOTO BY NEIL PALMER/IWMI



WOMEN IN THE RURAL TARAI-MADHESH HAVE MANY ROLES, WHICH ARE INCREASING WITH MALE OUT-MIGRATION. PHOTO BY NEIL PALMER/IWMI

access to cash. Being able to save money, decide where it is spent and acquire economic prosperity was considered more important than participating in public life for many women. This has implications for women's engagement in the irrigation sector and their access to water for agriculture.

### **Irrigation remains a masculine sector**

In spite of the social transformation brought about by migration and increased access to cash, this transformation has not been translated into greater empowerment for women in the irrigation sector. Across the region, irrigation remains predominantly a male domain. Only a handful of farmers in each village owned pumpsets and tubewells, and men in the household controlled most of these technologies. In groundwater dependent regions, men are traditionally responsible for negotiating with a richer neighbour to rent a pumpset. When husbands migrate, wives are largely dependent on their close kin, such as a father- or brother-in-law, to secure irrigation. Some women without male support have to take the initiative, but negotiation to purchase water takes place

in the public sphere (male-dominated gathering places like tea shops), which is not a welcoming environment for women. Irrigation also often occurs during the night, particularly when using electric pumps that are affected by power cuts. This again makes it difficult for women to irrigate their field due to prevailing gender norms, restricting them from going out to the field at night.

The government's groundwater program offers free tubewells to groups of farmers. However, women often benefit less from these schemes because they lack project information and have limited access to social networks necessary to mobilize a group and jointly apply for a tubewell. Marginalized groups, including women-headed households, landless farmers and low-caste groups frequently don't benefit from these programs. Because information-sharing mechanisms are mostly located in the district's headquarters, women with husbands overseas are doubly excluded because their capacity to engage alone in the public sphere is limited.

The one success story of the initiative is Fulkahakatti, where a number of

women's groups have received free tubewells and pumpsets and are cultivating vegetables. Ironically, the success in this case was dependent on the community having a politically influential male who could advocate on behalf of marginalized groups and ensure they received the free or subsidized equipment to which they were entitled.

In the canal dependent regions, which are served by the IWRMP project, women's participation in water user associations (WUAs) is low despite a 33% minimum mandatory quota for women representation, according to the rules of IWRMP and most other government irrigation projects. This is because there is no mechanism to enforce quotas. Even when present, women's roles are figurative and many do not seek greater involvement in WUAs due to low self-esteem and lack of education, as well as not being allowed to interact with men other than their husbands in the public sphere. Irrigation is perceived to be a man's job and women do not feel comfortable and knowledgeable enough to speak in front of their male counterparts in the WUA.

## Beyond quotas: addressing the politics of participation and masculine culture

Public irrigation agencies have a strong masculine culture that values technical skill and expert knowledge. Irrigation development and management through large-scale infrastructure is the priority within the government as well as for donors. However, irrigation management and farmers' participation in committees is highly political. Inadequate consideration of these political constraints that influence local water management is largely responsible for unequal water distribution, low levels of participation and frequently dysfunctional irrigation systems. Similarly, there is little recognition that irrigation systems are also social systems in which gender, caste and class shape access to water and the ability to derive benefits from irrigation. Focusing on women's participation in WUAs is not sufficient to address these social dynamics. At the same time, the masculine culture within the irrigation sector provides no incentives for irrigation officers to try to understand and address social inequalities in irrigation development and management. The references to gender in project documents seem imposed by donor requirements, and is not the result of a well thought-out action plans. There is

no specific activity or dedicated budget that aims to address inequalities by gender, caste or class in water access and governance.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

**Conduct a series of irrigation and gender workshops** involving all stakeholders in the irrigation sector including farmers, canal operators, department of Irrigation officials and donors. Tackling gender and social inequities in accessing and benefiting from irrigation is not only about quotas for women's membership. Irrigation management is as much about addressing political and social factors as it is about good technical design. The culture that favors masculine behavior must be changed. This includes challenging the way institutions value civil engineering knowledge over social understanding.

**Ensure that women's participation and capacity building trainings are linked with income generating programs**, so that women have an incentive to participate. Additionally, assist in the creation of women's groups when necessary. Grassroots organizations working with rural women should be able to inform and educate marginal farmers and women on the facilities

and subsidies available to them.

**Propose special programs** for marginal/landless and women farmers from lower caste communities, such as cooperatives with accessible entry terms (e.g. no collateral demanded) that provide loans with collective responsibility. This will help address the research finding that the poorest farmers without collateral do not have the same opportunities to engage with certain microenterprise and savings groups. Encourage more radical initiatives which have been piloted elsewhere, such as collective farming for small groups of female farmers. The pooling of labour, land and capital has the potential to revolutionise women led smallholder agriculture.

**Support literacy programs**, as illiteracy is one of the major reasons for lower participation of women at a decision-making level in water user groups. Illiteracy also limits access to services because of the need to complete complex paperwork. The Maa Laxmi Farmers Group success story in Fulakhakatti shows that adequate training and support can help women secure farm inputs and subsidies from government line agencies. Recently the Groundwater board handed over the program to the department of irrigation.

This brief presents the findings of the Nepal study "Unravelling agricultural gaps, challenges and opportunities in the Eastern Gangetic Plains of Nepal," which was part of the Poverty Squares and Gender Circles project, and was carried out by the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) and the Nepal Madhesh Foundation (NEMAF).

## ABOUT WLE

The CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE) promotes a new approach to sustainable intensification in which a healthy functioning ecosystem is seen as a prerequisite to agricultural development, resilience of food systems and human well-being. WLE combines the resources of 11 CGIAR centers, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the RUAF Foundation and numerous national, regional and international partners to provide an integrated approach to natural resource management research. This program is led by the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) and is supported by the CGIAR System Organization, a global research partnership for a food-secure future.