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Understanding forces of resistance in gender mainstreaming in Nepal's forest bureaucracy

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Key Highlights

1. Gender mainstreaming efforts in Nepal's forestry sector is limited.
2. Institutional resistance that underpins complex systems of power relations embedded in the social, cultural and bureaucratic landscape continues to hinder effective gender mainstreaming.
3. Structural reforms are necessary to address unequal power relations and dismantle historically persisted forces of resistance.
4. Structural changes, enabling institutional and organisational reforms, and strengthening policy enforcement are key recommendations.

Abstract

Mainstreaming gender in Nepal's forestry sector policies, institutions, and practices commenced as a response to the recognition of gender-based inequalities. The development of community forestry and national political changes over recent decades has facilitated a wider discussion on equity and justice, encouraging policy reforms. In this paper, we examine whether and how policies, strategies and institutions are challenging the status quo within the forest bureaucracy. More importantly, we identify forces of resistance that hinder effective implementation of gender-inclusive policies. The insights presented in this paper are based on data collected through central- and district-level workshops, document analysis, interviews, and direct observations. Based on the assessment at different levels, it is explicit that current efforts in the forestry sector to mainstream gender in policies, institutions and practices are limited. Policy changes indicate a progressive move towards mainstreaming gender to a certain extent while efforts to enable implementation of such policies are inadequate. For instance, a lack of institutional adaptation and organisational restructuring have hindered the effective implementation of these policies. Challenges identified at both central and district levels reflect broader socio-cultural norms deeply embedded in Nepal's patriarchal society. One of the key recommendations of this study is the need for structural changes, such as radical institutional and organisational reforms, to drive transformational behavioural

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change. Additionally, other recommendations include revisiting existing policies, approving the GESI strategy, preparing an actionable implementation plan, and strengthening mechanisms for monitoring and law enforcement.

Key Words: Forestry organisation, Gender mainstreaming, Institutional resistance, Policy

1. Introduction

Worldwide, forestry is a heavily male-dominated sector that restricts women's equitable access to leadership and decision-making roles. While there is a wide recognition of women's crucial roles in forest conservation and management, they are largely excluded from the decision-making process (Colfer, 2013). With growing concerns surrounding gender and social inclusion, multiple efforts have emerged aiming to improve women's participation in forestry through gender mainstreaming (Tyagi and Das, 2017). However, the forestry sector remains male-dominated, as evidenced by the under representation of women in decision-making roles (Wagle, 2017). Studies that examine gender and social inclusion in the forestry sector, mostly focus on women's participation at the community level. However, a critical gap exists in understanding why various efforts, including policy reforms, have not effectively responded to and mitigated structural gender disparities within the bureaucratic structure. Responding to this knowledge gap, we aim to examine the existing bureaucratic system of Nepal's forestry sector and identify the challenges that hinder effective gender mainstreaming.

Nepal, being one of the pioneer countries in South Asia to mainstream gender in development and natural resources policies, provides an interesting case for probing the question of whether or to what extent such initiatives are effective in challenging the status quo. Gender mainstreaming in Nepal's forestry sector has been fostered through the development of community forestry (Bhattarai, 2011), political shifts over the last few decades (Chhetri et al., 2008), and interventions from various stakeholders, including funding agencies and international women's movements (Agarwal, 2010). Some initiatives include institutionalising gender and social inclusion in plans, policies and programs introduced by the Ministry of Forests and Environment[5] in the forestry sector (MSFP, 2014). These initiatives have led to a certain level of preparedness required to institutionalise gender and social equity as cross cutting issues in forest policies and practices.

Along with the changing narratives on women and development at the global level, political reforms at the national level facilitated decentralised forestry governance, which enabled a conducive environment to initiate gender mainstreaming. However, the recognition of gender and social inclusion in Nepal's forestry sector has been a slow process (Wagle, Pillay and Wright, 2017).

Formal forestry education in Nepal began in 1950 with the establishment of a forest guard training centre under the Forest Department, later named the Nepal Forestry Institute, but university-level education began with the establishment of Institute of Forestry (IoF) in 1972 (IoF, 2023, pp. 1-2). There were no female students studying forestry until 1981. The admission of female students in IoF, was promoted through improved incentives such as the allocation of female quotas and the provision of scholarships for women (IoF, 2023, p. 163). The proportion of women studying

[5] then Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation

forestry has gradually increased, potentially improving the prospects for women's employment in public institutions (Christie and Giri, 2011). However, as forestry has always been perceived as a masculine profession, it has posed multiple challenges for women, limiting the prospects for gender equity either in universities or forestry organisations (Wagle, Pillay and Wright, 2017). This is evident in low entry rate of female graduates in forestry organisations. Looking at the history of employment in public institutions in Nepal, gradual improvements in women's representation have been promoted through representative bureaucracy (Wagle, 2019). However, such approaches are criticised for focusing mostly on increasing numbers rather than ensuring meaningful participation from underrepresented groups.

The first official recognition of gender-based disparities in forest policies began in the 1980s, with specific acknowledgement of women's participation in forest management in the Master Plan for the Forestry Sector (1986/1987). This plan provided a foundation for gender mainstreaming in Nepal's forestry sector. Many studies acknowledge the community forestry program for creating a platform for women's leadership and decision-making in forest management at the community level (Ojha, Cameron and Kumar, 2009). Political developments over the last couple of decades in Nepal have further facilitated wider discussions on gender mainstreaming at different levels, resulting in institutionalising inclusion through reservation. Constitution of Nepal 2015 – Article (38) states 'Women shall have the right to participate in all bodies of the State on the basis of the principle of proportional inclusion' (clause 4), and they 'shall have the right to obtain special opportunity in education, health, employment, and social security on the basis of positive discrimination' (clause 5). "The Constitution mandates that 40% of all elected representatives at the local level must be women, and 20% being Dalit women. Similarly, 33% of all elected representatives at the federal and provincial levels must be women, with additional representational quotas for other socially excluded groups" (MoFAGA, 2021). The second amendment to The Civil Service Act (1993) in 2007 aimed for inclusive policy by including reservation seats for women and people from marginalised backgrounds. The provision consists of 45% reserved seats, including 33% for women (18% of the total), 27% for indigenous communities, 22% for Madhesi, nine percent for Dalit, five percent for Disabled, and four percent backward area (GoN, 2007).

Even after the implementation of Reservation Policy, women's representation in civil service forestry has been the lowest (9.93%) when compared to other sectors whereas the national average was 23.72% (Public Service Commission, 2018). Despite the wide realisation that forestry is a male-dominated institution, gender studies in the sector have largely overlooked the limited presence and influence of women in public institutions. Regardless of social inclusion and gender equity discourse dominated the political stream for the last couple of decades, there has been a persistent resistance in gender mainstream within the forest bureaucracy. Scholars acknowledge that in such a context, it is important to recognise gender implications of institutions being entrenched upon power relations and how it is being reproduced through resistance to change (Kenny and Mackay, 2009; Wagle, Pillay and Wright, 2017). Hence, understanding forces of resistance can provide a diagnosis of the underlying barriers that hinder effective gender mainstreaming (Lombardo and Mergaert, 2013). In this study, we focus on identifying forces of resistance, particularly institutional resistance, recognising its role in perpetuating exclusion within organisational structures. We particularly aim to address the following research questions:

1. Whether or to what extent current efforts at gender mainstreaming are able to challenge the existing status quo in Nepal's forestry sector?

2. What forces of resistance hinder effective gender mainstreaming?

We begin our analysis by reviewing existing policies, institutions and practices from a gender mainstreaming perspective. In doing so, we particularly focus on identifying and critically analysing the nuances of resistance. This paper is organised into five sections. Section two provides conceptual framework drawing on literature that highlights the shifts in the way gender and social inclusion is recognised in organisational context. In section three, we provide a brief description of methods used to collect and analyse data in this study. Findings are presented in section four using different themes on policies and practices. In section five, we discuss the findings, analysing multiple forces of resistance and how they are (re)produced. We conclude this paper in section six providing some recommendations towards fostering a more socially inclusive and gender-equitable environment in forest management and conservation.

2. Understanding resistance to gender mainstreaming through Feminist Institutionalism (FI)

Rooted in feminist development practice and human rights discourses, gender mainstreaming emerged as a global strategy to promote gender equity (United Nations, 1997). There is no universal approach to gender mainstreaming, and different countries and organisations adopt and use it differently within specific social, cultural, economic, and political contexts (Moser and Moser, 2005; Walby, 2005), producing mixed outcomes across gender mainstreaming initiatives. The integration of gender into mainstream policy and political domains is a major contribution from gender mainstreaming (Walby, 2005), for example, advancing policy change (Arora-Jonsson, 2014), aiming to increase employment opportunities and gender responsive budgeting. However, there is widespread realisation that the translation of these guidelines/policies into substantial actions is hindered by multiple challenges (Benschop and Verloo, 2006; Moser and Moser, 2005; Brouwers, 2013). Understanding what hinders the effective implementation of such policies is crucial for achieving gender equality.

Different scholars who have studied institutional resistance have analysed different aspects of institutions such as normative (based on values), regulative (legislative frameworks) and cognitive (worldviews) elements (Palthe, 2014). The regulative element draws on legal frameworks and formal processes that can be changed through policy reforms (Meyer and Scott, 1983) and these may require law enforcement in ensuring the compliance. The normative element is the product of socially constructed obligations that underpin people's values shaping the way people behave while the cognitive elements underpin cultural legitimacy (Scott, 1995). The latter two are difficult to change just with changing rules. Understanding such resistance in the context of gender mainstreaming requires unpacking socio-cultural norms embedded in patriarchy (Lombardo and Mergaert, 2013).

Such forces of resistance specific to forestry are deeply rooted in the stereotype of forestry as a masculine profession (Gurung, 2002). Studies that acknowledge differentiated roles and

relationships of men and women in natural resources have been critical in confronting such stereotypes. For instance, ecofeminism and feminist environmentalism draw on feminism and environmentalism to highlight interconnectedness of women and nature, which are often marginalised by the system of patriarchy (Merchant, 1990; Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter and Wangari, 2013). Such acknowledgment has been crucial in advocating for a shift in values of conservation benefiting both society and the environment. Similarly, feminist political ecology offers an alternative critical perspective, crucial in unpacking differential power relations as embedded in the complex socio-political and cultural landscapes (Rocheleau, 1995). This perspective is critical in understanding that differential access and control of men and women over natural resources and decision making are deeply rooted in patriarchy and associated stereotypes (Leder, 2022). These studies often draw on women's engagement in managing, using, and conserving forests and other natural resources, recognising complex nuances of relationships between women and environment. While these perspectives offer conceptual lens to understand women's role in environmental management at the grassroot level, they provide lesser nuances within the system of bureaucracy (Wagle, 2017).

We use Feminist Institutionalism (FI) in this study as a heuristic for understanding bureaucratic systems, analysing the interaction between policies, actors, and interests by unpacking existing power relations within institutional contexts (Mackay, 2011; Wagle, Pillay and Wright, 2020). This approach also helps to analyse how these power dynamics obstruct the effective implementation of gender and social inclusion policies and practices (Thomson, 2018). Since power and resistance are inextricably linked (Johansson and Vinthagen, 2016), such resistance to gender mainstreaming reflects complex power relations embedded in patriarchy. We identify three key features of FI relevant to this study. First, FI specifically highlights areas largely overlooked by other institutional theories, such as how gendered relationships are perpetuated by the everyday practice of institutions (Kenny and Mackay, 2009). This aspect of FI is relevant for unpacking the gender underpinnings of formal and informal rules that shape perceptions and everyday practice of different actors, particularly those in decision making positions (Mackay, 2011). Second, FI offers relevance in analysing different forms of power and their complex interplay, underpinned by technocratic governance and patriarchy (Thomson, 2018). This interplay reinforces unequal power relations manifested in physical and symbolic realms. Lastly, as FI is grounded in historical realism that offers a critical perspective while examining change and barriers to change (Thomson, 2018) through path dependency (Eray, 2017). It also holds potential for examining opportunities for change within the context of federalism. This is based on the assumption that it is difficult to challenge/confront the status quo within the old institutional structure.

3. Methods

3.1. Research design and description of the case

We used a nested case study approach to unpack and investigate different aspects of gender mainstreaming in different levels of the forestry sector (Figure 1). Case studies draw on real-world sources and provides in-depth investigation of a specific phenomenon (Yin, 2009), while a nested case study approach, grounded in complexity thinking (Byrne, 2005), allows researchers to examine a particular case embedded within a broader context, considering multiple levels

of analysis. For example, the forest bureaucratic system is nested across multiple levels, from national to community level. Led by the Ministry of Forests and Environment (MoFE) at the top tier, the forestry sector includes several bureaucratic units such as the Department of Forests and Soil Conservation, Department of National Parks and Wildlife conservation, Forest Research and Training Centre, Department of Environment and Department of Plant Resources. The first three units are responsible for forest management, the management of national parks and wildlife reserves, and conducting research/providing training, respectively. At the provincial level, the forestry sector is governed by the Provincial Forest and Environment Ministries, which formulate and implement forest policies specific to their provinces in congruence with federal policies. The Provincial Forest Directorate is the technical unit responsible for implementing forest policy and providing guidance to Division Forest Offices. These offices work directly with community forests user groups (CFUGs), leasehold forests, and private forests in implementing forest management programmes.



Figure 1: Nested case of forest organisational system

Nepal's civil service is grounded in a hierarchical structure, headed by the Chief Secretary, who oversees the entire civil service including forestry. The secretary holds the highest leadership position within the forestry sector, followed by multiple Joint Secretaries, who are responsible for various roles, including policy formulation and implementation. Under Secretaries, mid-level administrators, mostly lead the sections and district-level units/organisations and are responsible for managing and coordinating their organisation with their respective divisions, ministries, and stakeholders. Officer-level employees implement specific programs and policies in the field. Non-gazetted employees also assist in implementing programmes at the field level.

3.2. Data collection methods

The insights presented in this study draw on multiple methods, such as desk reviews of forest policies, organisational reports, a literature review of scholarly articles, field visits, and formal and informal discussions with different stakeholders, including workshops and semi- structured interviews.

Workshops: (n =2 at national level and n=7 at district level) were conducted in 2017, prior to institutional restructuring. Each workshop was conducted with specific objectives and activities, and the objectives were clearly communicated to participants. Discussions were facilitated by the first author (gender focal person in REDD+ programme in Nepal), using a participatory approach that allowed participants to express their views. The facilitator's role was limited to guiding the discussion using predefined guiding questions, which were designed to understand different organisational dimensions and gender integration in forestry sector. Previously used and tested tools on organisational gender diagnosis were also used, as explained in Table 1 (Mukhopadhyay, Steehouwer and Wong, 2006). This tool employs a nine-box matrix to examine various aspects of gender dynamics in the organisational context, such as policies and procedures, leadership, recruitment, and monitoring and evaluation. Participants were asked to complete the matrix by rating their performance in each area on a scale. This tool enabled a comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics in different organisational contexts of interests. Altogether, 36 women foresters participated in the central-level workshop. We also utilised data collected from another central-level workshop with a more specific objective of capacity building on gender integration in REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation- the "+" signifies the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests, and enhancement of forest carbon stocks). This workshop was attended by 27 women participants, including newly recruited officers, rangers and forestry students. During these workshops, different policies acknowledging gender were discussed, identifying the relevant challenges and opportunities. Moreover, different organisational practices were identified and discussed based on whether and how those practices were relevant from gender perspective.

District-level workshops in seven districts (Nawalparasi, Bara, Bardiya, Kailali, Dang, Kapilvastu, and Dolakha) were also conducted with the same objective, involving a total of 141 participants, including 81 women. At the district level, representatives from community-based forest user groups, federation members, and non-government agencies were also invited to gather perspectives and insights into gender mainstreaming. We also included data from direct observations of participants during these workshops, focusing on their level of engagement, understanding of gender policies, and recognition of inherent assumptions related to gender equality.

Semi-structured interviews: Based on preliminary findings from the workshops, we conducted semi-structured interviews with women working in forest-gender nexus in different capacities. Participants for the interviews were recruited through purposive sampling, as the interviews were conducted based on the preliminary findings from the workshops. All Interview participants were women, most of whom were selected based on their engagement in gender issues in forestry. Participants included women working in forest-gender nexus (n=4), Indigenous women (n=2), and women with experience in leadership positions within and beyond the civil service (n=3). These interviews provided opportunities to validate some historical developments in gender and social inclusion, discuss anecdotes, and intersectionality of gender issues along with gaining insights based on personal experiences of women foresters from diverse backgrounds.

Autoethnographic engagement: We also draw on the autoethnographic reflections from the authors, based on their lived experiences in the forestry profession. For instance, policies relevant to gender and social inclusion in forestry were identified by authors through their familiarity with

policy process and implementation. The implications of these policies, including opportunities and challenges at different levels, were discussed during the workshops. Insights from three of the authors directly involved in policy implementation provided additional context for understanding these challenges through their everyday engagement in the forestry sector.

Table 1: Framework for organisational gender diagnosis (Nine-box tool)

	Mission /Mandate	Organisational Structure	Human Resources
Technical Point of View	Policies and Action - Analysis - Policy - Activity plans, strategies - Budget - Monitoring and evaluation - Impact	Tasks & Responsibilities - Tasks and responsibilities - Coordination/consultation - Information System - Gender Infrastructure	Expertise - Quantity - Quality/recruitment - Wages - Job description - Appraisal - Training
Political Point of View	Policy Influence - Role of management - People influencing the organisation from within - People influencing the organisation from outside	Decision Making - Adequate information - Participation in discussion and decision making - Conflicts management	Room for manoeuvre - Space for organising - Physical infrastructure - Reward/incentives system - Diversity of styles - Career opportunities
Cultural Point of View	Organisational Culture - Image - Ownership - Woman friendliness - Reputation	Cooperation and Learning - Teamwork - Support - Networking outside of organisation - Reflection/innovation	Attitudes - Enthusiasm - Commitment - Willingness to change - Stereotyping

Source: (Mukhopadhyay, Steehouwer and Wong, 2006)

3.3. Data analysis using triangulation and thematic analysis

Data analysis drew upon triangulation of data collected from multiple methods such as policy review, workshops, semi structured interviews, participant observations and autoethnographic reflection. Key features of the policies were identified in relation to gender and social inclusion, and analysed using content analysis (Morgan, 1993). We also used secondary data generated by the Public Service Commission (PSC) to understand whether and how gender mainstreaming efforts have enabled a policy environment to promote women's employment. We used thematic analysis to code, categorise and interpret the findings from the qualitative data collected through workshops and interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Participant observations during workshops were also instrumental in developing descriptive summaries and in triangulating and confirming some of the findings. We followed an iterative analytical process, which involved multiple reflections and

further refinement of themes through coding, categorisation and comparison until no new insights were evident.

4. Policies, institutions and organisational practices

Acknowledging the idea that gender mainstreaming spans across different stages, we examined policies, institutions and organisational practices, and present the findings in different themes such as limited achievement in women's representation through reservation system, systemic barriers to leadership, and mismatches in policy and practice. These themes are relevant to understand current challenges of gender mainstreaming in the forestry sector.

4.1. Limited achievement in women's representation through reservation system

The civil service is the principal gateway to employment in public institutions and is governed by the Civil Service Act, 1991. Like other sectors, the forestry bureaucracy doesn't have the authority to formulate or revise recruitment policy. The 2007 amendment to the Act is perceived as a milestone in ensuring inclusion in Nepal's bureaucracy, through a provision of 45% of seats in open competitions be reserved for marginalised groups, of which a third (33%) are designated for women. We reviewed the documents published by the PSC under different categories- open and internal competition- focusing specifically on the representation of women at various levels and how this has changed since the implementation of the reservation policy. We found that women's recruitment at entry-level positions has increased, suggesting that the reservation system has improved representation at these levels. Because there was minimal representation of female employees in forestry civil service prior to implementation of the reservation system, the numbers across other categories such as undersecretary and joint secretary is extremely low, which indicates significant barriers to women's advancement in higher positions. For instance, as of PSC records since 2007, only four women have passed the PSC examination for Under Secretary, with half recruited through the reservation quota, highlighting persistent systemic challenges in ensuring equal opportunities for women in open competitions. There are currently no women in top-level positions such as Secretary or Joint Secretary in the forest service, which underscores the barriers that remain for women's advancement.

4.2. Systemic barriers for women to leadership positions

The reservation policy was implemented by Nepal government after the interim constitution in 2007. According to this constitution, the second amendment of the Civil Service Act had the provision for the reservation. According to the Civil Service Act, the reservation system is applicable only for the open competition, which sharply decreases for the Under Secretary and Joint Secretary position and is non-existent for Secretary positions (see Table 2). For example, 70% of officer-level vacancies are filled via open competition, with 45% of these seats reserved-of which 33% go to women. However, only 10% of positions at the Under Secretary and Joint Secretary levels are filled through open competition, meaning just 4.5% of total vacancies fall under the reservation quota-further reduced to 1.49% for women. For many years, there has been no calls for open competition for the Joint Secretary positions but have been filled through internal promotion. In other words, higher positions are fulfilled through internal competition based on work performance and seniority.

Given that the reservation system is relatively recent, few women currently hold senior positions, and thus have limited access to promotion opportunities. Few women, who have made it to senior level positions, have experienced multifaceted challenges such as exclusion and othering. Most of the participants expressed concerns about implicit bias based and perceived incompetence. For instance, during an interview, one of the senior officers (female) stated: "Women leaders are not trusted (even by other women), they are tested every time. Women's voice gets heard only after it gets validation from the men counterpart. I feel like I am targeted at every situation."

Table 2: Allocation of reservation seats across different levels

Position	Recruitment through open competition of the total vacancy (%)	Reservation on total vacancy seat after 45% reservation on the open competition (%)	Reservation for female on total vacancy seat after 33% of 45% reservation on the open competition (%)
Non gazetted second class	70	31.5	10.40
Non gazetted first class	40	18	5.94
Gazetted third class	70	31.5	10.40
Gazetted second class	10	4.5	1.49
Gazetted first class	10	4.5	1.49
Note – The reservation quota applies only in open competition.			

Source: Government of Nepal (GoN), 2007

4.3. Mismatches in policy and practice

Below, we present findings related to policies under two different categories such as forest policies with broad and specific implications to gender in forestry.

Forest policies with broad gender implications: We reviewed different forest policies that have broad gender implications such as Community Forestry Development Program Guidelines (2014), National Forest Policy (2019), Forest Sector Strategy (2016-2025), Forest Regulations (2022), Nepal National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (2014-2020), and Forest Act (2019). First, we reviewed these policies identifying key features relevant to gender mainstreaming and later we asked participants to discuss these policies and their implications in addressing gender disparity. Participants in workshops agreed that these policies not only spell out the term 'gender' indicating some initiatives but also have created great momentum to address gender inequality through improved awareness. However, as these policies focus on gender implications at community forest user groups (e.g., improving women's participation in forest management decisions), they do not have any direct relevance to address gender disparities within the organisational context. One of the prevalent perceptions amongst staff is that gender mainstreaming is of importance for women at grassroot level but is considered less relevant for the women who were already educated and employed in government organisations. It may sound appreciative in general but reflects problematic assumptions, which overlook marginalisation of women in bureaucratic system, further leading to an inaction.

Gender-specific policies in forestry sector: We also reviewed policies directly relevant to address gender disparity at organisational level. The Forest Sector Gender and Social Inclusion Strategy (2008) focuses on four areas of gender mainstreaming such as - Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) sensitive policy and guidelines, equitable governance and GESI sensitive organisational development, GESI sensitive budget, programme and monitoring and equitable access to resources, decision-making and benefits. As discussed during the workshops, participants acknowledged this policy for providing a comprehensive framework to address gender inequality at organisational context through advocating for equitable governance and improving awareness in gender sensitive policies and programmes. Participants also discussed different challenges associated with this policy such as lack of implementation plan, lack of specific programme and budget, lack of effective monitoring mechanism, lack of law enforcement mechanism and limited resources. Participants also raised concerns for not having GESI strategy easily accessible (in print or online) while other policy documents are easily available in the Ministry's website. The government shows lack of commitment to create an enabling environment for effective implementation of the strategy.

Similarly, a draft of the revised Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan of Forest and Environment Sector 2020-2030 has been prepared since 2019 and is still in the process of finalisation and approval (see Box 1 for further details).

Box 1: Hesitation to approve amendment to GESI strategy

Amendment of GESI strategy, 2008 was submitted in 2019, but this is yet to get approval. Former draft was approved by the minister, MoFE and did not get wider acceptance. Revised draft was submitted to the cabinet for approval anticipating broader support involving diverse stakeholders. A key difference between these two documents is that the revised draft focuses on organisational responsibility while its previous one focused on addressing gender disparity at the community level. Moreover, the revised version has included behavioural aspects of gender and social inclusion, and it holds forestry organisations accountable to promote equity and inclusion within the forestry sector. Potentially, this may have created resistance from senior officials. The request for a language specialist to review the document suggests a potential discomfort with the changes in the revised draft. Moreover, despite having a wider discussion and consultation at district level and national level, the strategy was later returned for wider consultation.

We further analysed whether or how they are translated into practice. Despite having multiple policies that acknowledge different aspects of gendered relations in forestry, we found multiple mismatches affecting the way gender mainstreaming in the practice of forestry bureaucracy. As many participants collectively raised their concerns during workshops saying, "we don't even have basic facilities such as toilets that are exclusively allocated for women", reveals a part of reality that contrasts an emerging rhetoric of gender inclusivity. Above example was relevant to understand, regardless of how progressive policies may sound, they overlook gendered issues at everyday practices. Major challenges identified by the participants on policy-practice mismatches include limited knowledge on gender and social inclusion amongst staff at all levels, lack of implementation plan, lack of law enforcement mechanism, lack of monitoring and evaluation mechanism to ensure effective implementation of policies, lack of clear communications, and prevalence of ambiguity in different terms leading to interpretations based on convenience.

Lack of resources is often used as a reason to justify ineffective gender mainstreaming. It may be true to some extent in Nepal's context, but women facing more and multifaceted challenges in accessing resources and opportunities such as training and exposure visits indicates prejudiced practices based on gender. Lack of awareness in gender related issues was evident even amongst policy makers and implementing actors. Even amongst the people who support the idea of gender mainstreaming had difficulty understanding concepts and connotations. For instance, we observed that the notion of gender was often confused with women's issues, leading to undermining complexity associated with gender.

Participants (workshops and interviews) have also indicated areas that need specific attention and provided some practical recommendations to address those issues, such as translation of policies into action through developing implementation plans including monitoring and evaluation, gender responsive budget etc. Moreover, participants at all levels, indicated the need of genuine efforts required in developing and implementing common code of conduct, conducting broad campaign in zero tolerance on sexual harassment, gender friendly infrastructure/facilities, improved access to information and gender sensitisation and capacity building of staffs from gender perspective at all levels of organisation. Some recommendations were different across different levels such as national level, district level and community level. One of the common concerns expressed by the participants at national level was minimal efforts in institutional restructuring (including functional, structural and financial mechanism) to comply with gender sensitive policies. While the participants from district offices repeatedly highlighted complete absence of organisational GESI policies.

4.4. Establishment of Female Foresters Network to strengthen gender mainstreaming

Policy-practice mismatches, lack of commitment to achieve gender equality and persistence of masculine work culture led to the establishment of Female Foresters Nepal (FFN) following a series of discussions among concerned professionals. FFN has received wider support within and outside the forestry organisation. It has created opportunities in bringing wider attention to the regressive and patriarchal culture practised in forestry sector, which was rarely discussed in the past. Workshops, trainings, webinars and different interaction programmes delivered by FFN in collaboration with national and international organisations, have been instrumental in gender sensitisation across the sector. A participant during an interview, reflecting on the impact of the gender sensitisation program shared that there's been multiple positive changes for example, parents have no restrictions in bringing their children to office, multiple cases of sexual harassment at workplace being reported and the perpetrator being punished, which didn't happen prior to establishment of this network. Moreover, the issues that were never addressed through formal institutions, after getting acknowledged by this network, have started getting wider attention within formal organisations. However, as explained by the active members of FFN, they are experiencing multiple criticisms. Such critics claim that raising workplace harassment issues publicly discredits the forestry sector and threatens the culture of workplace camaraderie. Not having any legal recognition has few limitations such as formal recognition by various organisations during collaboration and opportunity sharing and in resource access but these have not limited the female foresters in working towards gender equality within the sector.

5. Institutional resistance hindering gender mainstreaming in forest bureaucracy

Findings of this study clearly show that gender mainstreaming has been ineffective within the organisational context of the forestry sector. In this section we have analysed multiple forces of resistance contributing to such hindrances. It is explicit from this study that institutional resistance has formally reinforced inequality based on gender as evident in many discriminatory practices. For example, rigid hierarchies, prejudiced practices of staff promotions, and unequal distribution of resources were some of the examples of how institutional resistance has manifested within organisational context. These examples were identified by participants during interviews and workshops at different levels. Institutional resistance underpins complex systems of power relations embedded in the social, cultural and bureaucratic landscape as defined in following sub themes:

Bureaucratic governance reinforcing authoritative power: Existing literature demonstrate that bureaucratic governance and patriarchy are often reinforcing each other (Giri et al., 2022) making it difficult to dismantle gendered norms and structures. Historically, the forestry sector has drawn on top-down and technocentric governance (Gilmour and Fisher, 1991). Despite multiple political reforms, forestry still maintains the legacy of centralised governance (Ojha, Cameron and Kumar, 2009; Sunam, Paudel and Paudel, 2013; Sapkota et al., 2024). This has implications in the way different forces of resistance act upon, hindering the transformative change required for gender equality. This is clearly demonstrated in the way gender policies are formulated and implemented. For instance, the policy domain is highly centralised and male-dominated, which implies exclusion of women in policy making. This is evident in multiple processes of policy making including underpinning assumptions while framing issues in policies, for example framing gender disparity as a technical and managerial issue that can be solved with technical solutions. Such framing limits a deeper understanding of systemic gender inequality because it oversimplifies the complexity associated with systemic issues that reproduce gender inequality. Such reflection is consistent with other scholarly works that criticise current approaches to gender mainstreaming for increasing the risk of depoliticising and reducing gender disparity to an issue of management (Hawkesworth, 1994; Lovenduski, 1998).

Inactions and delayed actions taken by those in power also revealed a form of resistance grounded in authoritative power as evident in multiple processes of policy making. For instance, despite the formulation of GESI strategy in 2008, no concrete action plan was developed to implement it which indicated a limited concern/efforts placed in translation of policies. We found a response very common from those involved in policy making that we are ahead of many countries in making gender sensitive policies. This might be paradoxically true but looking at who makes policies, who's responsible for implementation, and how issues are framed in policies help understand complex interplay of multiple forces of resistance. Such resistance often arises from those who benefit from maintaining the status quo, and by challenging traditional practices may jeopardise their authority (Kenny, 2007). In some cases, such resistance is a result of limited awareness and understanding of the issue and gendered nuances. Overcoming this requires sensitisation, awareness, training etc. However, limited priority and resources allocated to gender sensitisation demonstrates limited willingness to challenge the existing status quo. Another aspect of technocratic governance is prioritising productivity over any social issues including gender inequality. This is evident in the

current narrative of economic prosperity through the forestry sector (Giri et al., 2022), portraying economic development as mutually exclusive to social development.

It is evident that political changes have created opportunities for wider discussion on gender inclusivity but as forestry is a heavily political field in Nepal and men as the dominant actors in politics, men have benefited more from such changes further widening the gap mostly in the areas of leadership. While institutional restructuring can provide opportunities to revise gendered institutions, it's not always sufficient to guarantee transformative change. For instance, through authors' engagement and a few interviews, it was evident that centralised and patriarchal ideals of decision making are replicated at provincial level instead of utilising the restructuring opportunities to dismantle such top-down and gendered institutions.

Symbolic dominance embedded in patriarchy: This is not completely different from the previous theme but helpful to understand that complex power dynamics embedded in socio-cultural norms and practices are often manifested symbolically (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2003). While the previous theme of governance emphasised hierarchical reinforcement of authoritative power, as evident in decision making. But we also identified other different forms of power less overt but symbolic in expressions deeply embedded in patriarchal ideals. As evident during workshops and interviews, the symbolic nature of differential power relations in the forestry bureaucratic system has created a complex environment for women to directly confront such power imbalances due to the subtle and ingrained nature of the symbolic cues. For example, use of language that perpetuates traditional gender roles, using informal gathering and social network to make important decisions. Usually these are subtle and not easily recognisable, deeply internalised by both men and women making it difficult to challenge. In some instances, we found women foresters internalising these dynamics, and perceiving them as the natural order. A participant during the interview expressed that it is intimidating to confront such reality. For those who have attempted to challenge the status quo, have experienced discouragement, leading them to question their own intention.

Through the realisation that it is important to dismantle historically persisted forces of resistance to enable transformative change, a group of people (within and outside forestry organisation) created an informal network known as Female Foresters Nepal (FFN). But in response to such movement further resistances have been built within forestry bureaucracy and it is difficult to recognise and address these resistances as these are subtle and symbolic as stated by a senior female forester during interview, who is actively involved in this network since its establishment. Symbolic dominance is often practiced and perpetuated through cultural and knowledge hegemony (Baral, Shrestha and Tiwari, 2024) and is difficult to mitigate through mere policy change due to multiple reasons. There are many other examples of how symbolic dominance is practiced in a myriad of ways, without being questioned. For instance, during an interview, a female participant shared that she was told by someone (male at a higher position) that she is capable and doesn't need reservation. Few others shared similar experiences related to the reservation seat. This may look supportive but subtly endorses the stereotype of marginalised as incapable. Moreover, such a narrative on an individual's capability, undermines nuances of disadvantages women experience due to structural barriers, through different circumstances of life, from getting university education to employment.

Passive resistance induced through fear of further marginalisation: Different forms of resistance have been well documented in gender literature (Flood, Dragiewicz and Pease, 2021). Mostly such resistance comes from the powerful group who benefit from maintaining the status quo (Agócs, 1997). In this study, we also observed resistance from women, comparatively much lesser than men. This theme is relevant to understand why some women refused to support any actions aimed at addressing gender disparity. For example, as explained by one of the founding members of FFN, the women foresters who were hesitant to be directly associated with the network have revealed the fear of being further marginalised due to such association. This was also confirmed by a participant actively engaged in this network, who shares the concerns such as: "I have been personally targeted for being vocal about gender issues [..] people have questioned me for being vocal about different issues women are facing, this has largely affected my motivation for future participation." Another participant expressed similar concern saying: "My participation in such a network has affected my prospects for career opportunities."

These observations are consistent with other scholarly studies on workplace resistance and perpetuation of marginalisation through complex interplay of power (Flood, Dragiewicz and Pease, 2021). Coming back to reflection on gender mainstreaming as an approach to mitigate gender-based disparities, it is well evident that current approaches are not adequate. Rather these can mask nuances of gender relations underpinned by complex power relations at multiple levels (Daly, 2005). However, one of the major achievements of gender mainstreaming include policy changes that institutionalise gender as a socially constructed idea underpinned by an inequitable system of power relations based on gender. Such acknowledgement is a prerequisite to enable pathways to challenge the status quo.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Nepal's commitment to addressing existing gender disparity has co-evolved through multiple interrelated events and initiatives occurring at different levels, from the local to the global community. Despite emerging as an important policy concern, efforts to mitigate gender disparity within organisational context have mostly been limited to increasing the recruitment of women staff at the officer level (that too insignificantly), rather than genuinely enabling an environment for meaningful participation of women in leadership and decision-making. In this study, we examined policies, institutions, and practices in the forestry sector of Nepal, analysing how gender mainstreaming has evolved and critically assessing the factors that hinders effective implementation of gender policies. We identified and analysed different forms of resistance as observed within the system of forestry organisations. Findings from this study clearly confirm that forestry is a heavily male-dominated sector that restricts equitable access for women to leadership and decision-making. Based on the findings, we provide some recommendations as follows:

Confronting systemic barriers: Systemic barriers are deeply embedded in structures, policies and practices that reinforce further marginalisation of women and other disadvantaged groups. It is important to recognise that structural barriers are systemic and often symbolic, which prevents them from being visible and acted upon. Without confronting the status quo through radical transformation at different levels, it is unrealistic to assume that mere policy changes will dismantle gender-based disparities in forestry and other development sectors. Conducting more

research to understand these barriers and tailoring recommendations can be effective. Moreover, it is important to deconstruct multiple stereotypes that favour masculine ideals in forestry- for example, the narrative that links forestry with prosperity.

Revisiting current policies, and law enforcement: Inherent assumptions in current policies that frame gender disparity as a technical issue undermine the complexity of the issue which has historically persisted through formal and informal institutions embedded in social, cultural, and economic relationships. Such assumptions need to be revisited, drawing on more recent research that can provide new insights into how changing approach at policy process can better respond to gender disparities, both generally and within organisational contexts. Moreover, there are policies that have become less relevant with changing circumstances and thus less responsive to contemporary contexts. An implementation plan provides a roadmap to ensure the successful translation of policies into practice. However, the lack of implementation plans for most gender and social inclusion-related policies emerged as a recurring theme in our analysis and was also evident in other studies. Such plans should include detailed steps and process, including allocation of resources, identification of responsible actors, a timeline for achieving specific goals, and clearly defined monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. We also found that lack of effective law enforcement mechanism has resulted in limited practical outcomes. This requires greater emphasis on transparency, holding policymakers and law enforcement agencies accountable for their actions.

Targeted interventions: While confronting and dismantling traditional patriarchal ideals and structure is a long-term goal, it is crucial to act upon immediate and tangible interventions to address urgent needs. Our findings identified some areas that require targeted interventions such as gender inclusive language guidelines, mentorship programmes for women officers, flexible working arrangements, training to identify subconscious bias, women-friendly infrastructure, childcare facilities, and increased parental leave. Acting upon these recommendations can foster an environment conducive to women's active participation, leadership, and empowerment within the forestry sector.

Promoting inclusive and collaborative governance: The limited number of women in leadership roles within a centralised governance structure implies that systemic barriers are preventing women from fully participating in policy-making processes. This can be improved through a myriad of ways such as, promoting more inclusive governance that empowers women and ensures their representation at all levels of the policy hierarchy. Moreover, it is important to amend the reservation policy to pave the pathways for more women to ascend to leadership positions. The forestry sector in Nepal predominantly operates as a technocratic sector with limited interactions with wider stakeholders. Promoting collaborations with different sectors working on social justice can provide learning opportunities and create avenues for gender mainstreaming at different stages of the policy process.

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