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Conference Report

Empowering Rural Women? Policies, Institutions, and Gendered Outcomes in Natural Resources Management

Sara Ahmed

Rural women's participation in natural resources management (NRM) is commonly based on the assumption of a simplistic convergence of interests: first, that women are 'natural' environmentalists and, second, that improvements in natural resources will automatically bring gains for women. Evaluations of development policies and practice over the past two decades clearly indicate that this win-win equation does not always hold. Essentialising rural women as privileged environmental managers overlooks the different needs and priorities of different groups of resource users, which are structured by relations of power (class, caste, and gender) and embedded in intersecting institutional sites. Understanding how gender and equity are reflected in NRM policies and programmes requires us to deconstruct four key institutional sites—the state, the market, the community, and the household—and the rules and practice which govern their organisational forms.

It is against this background that the Institute of Rural Management, Anand, Gujarat (IRMA) organised a Workshop entitled: 'Empowering Rural Women? Policies, Institutions and Gendered Outcomes in Natural Resources Management' (NRM), 7–9 September 2000. The workshop was held

under the CIDA-funded Shastri Indo-Canadian partnership project, Rural Change, Gender Relations and Development Organisations, which has involved collaborative work between researchers from IRMA and Dalhousie University over the past two years. Some 45 senior-level women and men from leading NGOs and donor agencies in India, including SEWA, Utthan, Seva Mandir, URMUL, AKRSP(I), Outreach, BAIF, NTGCF, Danida, and the Royal Netherlands Embassy, as well as independent consultants and academics, participated in the Workshop. The main issues to be addressed were:

- How have gender and equity concerns been addressed or integrated in NRM policies, programmes, and practice?
- What are the obstacles and opportunities determining women's and men's participation in decision making about NRM at multiple levels of analysis (household/community/organisation/governance structures)?
- What are the lessons to draw from 'best practices' that have been adopted to facilitate gender transformative outcomes in institutional design for participatory and sustainable NRM?

The Workshop began with a practical exercise on the concept of empowerment wherein participants were asked to reflect on their understanding of it at the level of the self, the organisation, and their (NRM-specific) projects. For most participants, empowerment was not only the ability to take decisions and do things for themselves, but more importantly to have space (freedom to articulate views) in personal relationships. Some participants felt that women development practitioners see empowerment as a process, while their male colleagues tend to view it as

a 'product', something to be achieved vis-à-vis women beneficiaries. In the context of NRM interventions, empowerment was seen as increased access to and control over resources by (poor) women, as well as collective responsibility for exercising decisions in terms of resource management.

While there are multiple understandings of empowerment, it needs to be seen as a process, contextually located within a broader (Foucauldian) framework of power as relational and diffused. It is this conceptualisation of power that then informs our approach to institutions—the state, for example, is not a monolithic structure divorced from society, but a complex entity with multiple levels of interacting institutions. Power exercised by the state is mediated or contested by other power relations at dispersed sites of struggle. For example, NRM policies have increasingly sought to emphasise the role of community participation in resource management, yet the rhetoric of decentralisation is frustrated by power brokers (vested interests) at the local level who do not want to share decision-making authority with the community in general, least of all women resource-users. Meanwhile, new economic policies and the growing integration with global markets have implications for livelihood security and ecological sustainability. However, the relationship between gender equity and poverty in the context of economic change in India (e.g. the current structural adjustment programme) is not linear. Although existing inequities are heightened, there are also opportunities for employment and income generation depending on the degree of integration with markets and the ability of marginalised groups to participate effectively in the new economy.

Professor Bina Agarwal (Indian Institute of Economic Growth in Delhi), in her keynote address, examined the issue of gender and participation in the context of community forestry initiatives in India and South Asia. While community forestry groups represent one of the fastest growing attempts at participatory development, questions need to be asked about the nature of

participation, particularly women's participation. Equally, it is important to distinguish between *nominal* participation, essentially membership in a community group in the interests of efficiency and environmental sustainability, and *active* participation where the powerless and marginalised are given a voice in decision making, thus leading to equity and empowerment. Global and national discourses have predominantly focused on activity-specific participation of women based on the underlying eco-feminist assumption that women have a special relationship with nature. Such an understanding has looked at gender roles rather than the more problematic issue of gendered rights (to resources, benefits, and decision making). However, despite legal changes in Joint Forestry Management provisions in some states to facilitate women's membership in forest user groups, the extent to which they are consulted—or, if consulted, their ability to influence decisions—is debatable.

Clearly, any discussion on women's participation needs to be contextualised. This necessitates looking at both structural (e.g. membership norms, the gender segregation of public space) and non-structural determinants of women's participation, for example social perceptions about women's abilities, social norms about what is or is not appropriate behaviour for women, and endowments (education, assets, etc.) which reflect gender inequalities. Enhancing women's participation in forestry involves both addressing the role of the state in defining membership criteria as well as strategies at the community and household level. For example, should there be a separate group for women forest users and how should this be linked to larger forums? Can organisations as a policy enforce equal wages for equal forestry-related work for both men and women, as the National Tree Growers' Cooperative Federation has done? What is the role of networking (e.g. the national Joint Forest Management Gender and Equity Network) and federating in terms of capacity building and negotiating with the state?

In the context of water management, while communities have played a significant role

in managing traditional water sources in the past, the intensification of irrigated agriculture, urbanisation, and industrialisation, and the appropriation of water provision by the state, have increasingly led to conflicts over water use between users, and between users and the state. NGOs such as Utthan and SEWA have played an important role in demonstrating the viability of alternative water technologies and delivery/management systems as well as *engendering* the state through their representation on state-level water policy committees and national networks, and their participation in collaborative agendas such as the Gujarat Water Vision 2010 or the White Paper on Water. However, attempts at enhancing women's participation in community water management institutions or household decision making on water use have had mixed results. Emerging insights suggest that, despite the high visibility of women's participation in community institutions, there is often little change in their resource-related roles, responsibilities, and rights at the household level.

A wide range of presentations from development practitioners and researchers addressed a number of these issues in the context of women's participation in community forestry, agriculture, irrigation, and watershed development; and emerging implications for 'empowerment'. Papers also addressed the links between community-based NRM institutions and women's Self-help Groups (SHGs)—to what extent does women's participation in the latter facilitate their access to decision making in mixed community forums? Additional presentations looked at the role of donor agencies and government bodies in creating a gender-supportive institutional environment for project partners.

While a detailed compilation of Workshop presentations and discussions is currently underway, a number of key learning points and strategies for taking them forward emerged. It is clear that workshops of this kind, despite structural limitations, provide a valuable platform for academics and

practitioners to share their work and engage in critical discussion with each other, and with donors and policy makers. Although there was no universal understanding of terms such as empowerment or women's participation, even among participants, the need for rigorous methodology and empirically sound research was accepted by everyone. If research methods and findings are to be used more widely by NGOs or policy makers, then they need to be disseminated in forms which are understandable, accessible, and practical. For example, a simple tool for organisational gender assessment would prove useful for many NGOs. Some participants maintained that we need to move beyond structural constraints to women's participation as well as documenting lessons from interventions which have largely failed and are more widespread, rather than always focusing on limited success stories. Suggestions for taking the workshop learning further included subscribing to an existing e-group on gender equity and NRM issues, or perhaps forming a separate e-group later, and periodic networking in smaller, regionally based groups.

In sum, the Workshop highlighted multiple strategies for working with women/gender concerns in NRM, for example, the different entry points employed by NGOs, as well as a range of methods for understanding the underlying intent of NRM policies and organisational practices towards more gender-equitable outcomes. Given the diversity of institutional contexts, attempts to empower rural women through NRM interventions raise as many questions as they provide answers or lessons from which we can generalise adequately, despite growing empirical insights. Strong research, collaborative partnerships, and creative dissemination remain important if we are to enhance praxis in this field.

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