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## Community Forestry, Power and Inequality in Nepal

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### ABSTRACT

Community forestry of Nepal is widely recognized as a successful model of decentralized environmental governance and community development. It has significantly contributed to forest regeneration across Nepal. However, its social outcomes in terms of participation, decisions and distributions of benefit remain uneven and unjust among social groups. This article examines community forestry as an institution for community development and change. It focuses on how social hierarchies and power relations influence participation, leadership, and benefit distribution within Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs).

The study outlines three main objectives. First, it analyzes how gender, caste, and class shapes participation and leadership roles in Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs). Second, it evaluates whether governance on community forestry practices reproduces or reduce inequality at the local level. Third, it analyzes how migration and livelihood changes under community forestry practices changes influence power and decision-making in community forestry institutions. The article is based on a qualitative review of relevant literatures and institutional reports published among 1990 and 2024.

The findings show that decentralization on the forest management system has expanded formal participation in the forest resource management. However, major decision-making power remains concentrated among socially and economically privileged groups within community. Women's participation is often limited and largely symbolic and instrumental rather than equal participations and ownership in a substantive way. Caste and class continue to influence leadership and benefit sharing. Centralized bureaucratic procedures continue to limit deliberative processes effect on outcomes of community forestry. The article, based on review of previous research, concludes that community forestry in Nepal is a space where different groups struggle over power and resources. The main thematic outcomes of this analysis is that promoting equity requires more than procedural and instrumental inclusion. It requires assurance of meaningful participation to achieve equitable outcomes. It also calls for institutional reform that addresses structural inequalities and decision-making power among social groups.

### KEYWORDS

Community forestry; Social inequality; Participatory governance; Migration; Nepal

### Introduction

### Background

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Nepal's community forestry program is widely recognized as for decentralized natural resource governance and participatory development. It is also seen as an important model of community development. It developed in Nepal to response the limitations of centralized forest management during the mid-twentieth century. Policy reforms in the late 1980s and early 1990s institutionalized this shift from state to people. This was particularly possible through the Forest Act 1993. This law transferred use and management rights and duties over national forests to Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs). These are locally formed institutions responsible for forest protection, utilization, and benefit distribution (Government of Nepal, 1993). Since then, community forestry has been credited with reducing deforestation properly in Nepal. It improving forest conditions, and strengthening local management practices for sustainable forest development (Pokharel & Byrne, 2009).

Community forestry covered more than one-third of Nepal's forest area. Millions of rural households involved in community forestry network by the early 2020s (Banjade et al., 2010). It became central to both environmental governances through community forestry and rural development practices. International agencies and scholars often taken the name of community forestry of Nepal. Nepal's experience as seen as a model of participatory forestry and democratic decentralization. Reports of empirical studies has shown that improvements in forest regeneration, biomass recovery, and rule compliance from community forestry is significant (Varughese & Ostrom, 2001; Springate-Baginski et al., 2003).

However, improvement by forest regeneration does not automatically ensure social equity and equally empowerment to the local people. Sociological research shows that community forestry operates within existing social structures practiced unequally. These structures are shaped by caste hierarchy, gender inequality, class differences, and unequal political power (Agarwal, 2010; Nightingale, 2011). These structures influence who participates actively in CFUGs. They also shape who holds leadership positions in community forestry. Furthermore, they determine who benefits from forest resources among the surrounding people.

Different studies on community forestry indicate that participation is often formal rather than functional and practical for all people and social group. Legal reforms and donor initiatives have increased representation which is not represent all context of achievements. Decision-making power frequently remains unequal for all socially and economically disadvantage groups (Iversen et al., 2006; Luintel et al., 2017). Women, Dalits, and poorer households may be included in committees. However, they face barriers such as restrictive social norms and values. They also struggle with limited education and weak political networks that effect on participation (Lama & Buchy, 2002). Consequently, access to timber, income from forest products, and control over community funds often favors local elites and socially privileged groups.

Community forestry is not only an environmental and ecology-based program. It also a social field where power and authority are negotiated among the state and local people to use natural resources. In many cases, patterns of exclusion persist under the language of participation and consensus under community forestry program (Ojha et al., 2009). Community ownership through decentralization may disguise power relations and negotiations that shape forest governance.

Policy discussions in Nepal have largely emphasized on technical design. It focused on institutional efficiency, and ecological indicators. Similarly, less attention has been given to the social relations and proper participations by the name of forest governance. This imbalance can depoliticize community forestry. It can also unclear how leadership

is formed and get opportunities from the local community. As a result, inequalities may sustain despite formal inclusion and seen legal procedures. Political ecology scholars argue that environmental governance must be examined within broader political and economic contexts. It should not be treated as a neutral management system alone (Robbins, 2020).

This article based on sociological approach and conceptualizes community forestry from sociological perceptive. It synthesizes outcomes based on different literatures based on status of community forestry in Nepal. Similarly, it examines how caste, class, gender, and migration impact participation in community forestry of Nepal. It analyzes the power relations between state and agency and benefit distribution within CFUGs. This analysis helps to understand the limits of decentralization in forest management. It also helps identify ways to achieve more equitable forest governance. The study provides a qualitative review of sociologically oriented research published among 1990 and 2024. It does not assess biophysical forest outcomes. However, it focuses on power and participation. It analyzes inequality and governance processes within community forestry institutions. The analysis is based on political ecology approach, Bourdieu's theory of capital, and Sen's capability approach. These frameworks help explain how decentralization on forest interacts with social structure and individual agency at local level.

The article addresses three research questions. First, how do social hierarchies shape participation and leadership in community forestry? Second, how are caste, class, and gender inequalities challenged in CFUG governance? Third, how do migration and livelihood changes affect authority and decision-making in community forestry?

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

Understanding community forestry as a social institution requires attention to power, inequality, and agency is significant in sociological analysis. This review draws on three complementary frameworks. It is based on political ecological approach, Bourdieu's theory of capital, and Sen's capability approach. These perspectives help explain how the formal decentralization process in community forestry interacts with informal social relations

### **Political Ecology and Environmental Governance**

The political ecological perspective to examine power relations argues that environmental governance is formed by power relations and historical processes. It is also influenced by political economy (Robbins, 2020). It further discusses that decentralization does not automatically lead to democratic control over resources. If historically rooted hierarchies based on caste and gender remain intact, inequality may continue as its outcomes. In such conditions, new institutions may reproduce existing inequalities. Consequently, structural disparities continue despite institutional reforms. In Nepal, political ecology research shows that community forestry institutions are influenced by local elites. Similarly, it is influenced by centralized state and its agencies equally (Malla, 2001; Ojha et al., 2009). Formal participation rules often exist alongside informal practices such as support and negotiation. Institutional design under instrumental way alone cannot explain governance outcomes. It must also examine how authority and power is exercised and challenged in everyday CFUG practices.

### **Bourdieu's Theory of Capital**

Sociologist, Bourdieu (1986) in postmodern development thinking develop a known as theory of capital which explain why state decentralization often benefits for certain groups more than others. He identifies different forms

of capital existed in the society, i.e. economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. These forms of capital shape an individual's position within a social context. In community forestry, households with greater wealth are often better positioned to influence decisions (Iversen et al., 2006). Those with higher caste status, better education, and strong political connections also have more benefitted (Luintel et al., 2017). They may have convert their social resources and networks into leadership roles. It may have privileged access to forest benefits from decision making level from community forestry. Formal inclusion does not always lead to equal participation without addressing social composition. Differences in education among people create disadvantages to make access on entire output. Limited familiarity with bureaucracy also creates barriers. Low social confidence makes participation more difficult for marginalized households (Adhikari & Lovett, 2006). By the explanation of this perspective, elite capture on resources is not only an implementation problem. It reflects broader inequalities in the distribution of capital within rural society among social groups.

### **Capability Approach and Participation**

Sen's (1999) capability approach distinguishes among formal rights and actual freedoms at local level. Legal recognition alone does not ensure that individuals have the real opportunity to participate effectively. This distinction is important in assessing community forestry governance and possibility of outcomes from community forestry. Many CFUGs meet inclusion requirements only sake for legal requirements by appointing women, Dalits, or marginalized ethnic members to committees. However, their presence does not guarantee influence on governance procedures (Agarwal, 2001; Nightingale, 2011). Time constraints from household mainly for women, limited literacy, restricted mobility cause of caste restriction, and social norms reduce the effective capabilities of marginalized members. This condition has been described as symbolic participation which is consisted only cosmetic in nature (Ojha et al., 2009). It suggests beyond numerical representation in community forestry and focuses on substantive level of participations to use forest resources.

### **Community Forestry in Nepal**

Community forestry in Nepal developed in the late twentieth century. It emerged during a broader change in national forest policy. This policy change moved from centralized control toward participatory management of forest resources. The shift moved from centralized forest control to participatory governance. Earlier state-led management had contributed to forest degradation due to the cause of absence of community participations. It had also reduced local access to forest resources. Policy reforms in the late 1980s and early 1990s redefined forests as resources managed by organized user groups (Hobley, 1996).

The Forest Act 1993 established a legal framework for community forestry. The Forest Regulations 1995 further strengthened this framework. Those legal reform on resources management transferred management rights to Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs).

(Government of Nepal, 1993). These community groups gained authority at local level to prepare operational plans, manage forest resources, and distribute benefits among members. It was significant paradigms shift from top down to bottom up for resources management and ecological governance in Nepal. The reforms were widely praised for strengthening local autonomy. They were also credited with improving forest conditions, especially in the Middle Hills (Springate-Baginski et al., 2003).

Over time, community forestry expanded in both scale and function in Nepal. CFUGs now engage in timber marketing at small level, income-generating activities, and participation in global initiatives as for climate finance (Devkota & Mustalahti, 2020). It promotes to Nepal's identity and position on the field of community forestry. This expansion has increased the economic and social value of forests. It raised the political attention and debates for forest governance. It has also created new opportunities for rent seeking which may support to the local people. Although policy discourse and reforms in community forestry emphasize equity and good governance. It has remains challenges on ownership debates, participation and equity. Research shows a gap among formal purposes of community forestry and actual social outcomes. Decentralization has often been accompanied by bureaucratic oversight. It also includes technical planning requirements. Market-oriented reforms further reshape local power relations (Kanel & Dahal, 2008; Basnyat, 2020). Therefore, understanding the social impact of community forestry requires attention to historical legacies and its initial motives. It also requires examining ongoing governance transformations at local level to understand and review diverse context of positive and negative outcomes from Hill to Terai.

## **Analysis of facts**

### **Gender, Patriarchy and Participation**

Gender inclusion and participation is a major achievement of Nepal's community forestry program under androcentric social practices. The Forest Act 1993 requires women's representation in Community Forest User Group (CFUG) executive committees. It effects on women's decision-making processes. Later policy change and its instructions further strengthened this requirement properly. Consequently, some positions must be held by women is significant for power relations and outcomes sharing. As a result of legal provisions and state initiations, women's numerical participation has increased over the past two decades significantly in the community forestry of Nepal. National studies report that women now make up about 35–40 percent of executive committee members. Women's representation in community forestry is often higher because of support from donor's initiations (Agarwal, 2010; Murer & Piccoli, 2022).

However, numerical inclusion does not ensure decision-making power in a real sense is a sociological issue of analysis of participations. Comparative research shows that women are present in committees. However, fewer women actively participate in discussions. Even fewer influence key decisions such as timber harvesting schedules, pricing, or the allocation of CFUG funds (Agarwal, 2001). In many cases, women are assigned supportive roles such as record-keeping or fulfilling attendance requirements rather key place for decision-making. Strategic decisions often remain controlled by male members which is ignored.

Ethnographic research of this field confirms this pattern. Nightingale (2011), done a research based on fieldwork in the hill districts of Nepal, reports that women frequently attend meetings. However, they often remain silent in meetings where both men and women are present shows gender disparities in key community work. So called, higher-caste men often dominate discussions. Important decisions are sometimes discussed informally before formal meetings take place which is always hidden. These discussions often happen through kinship networks and male-dominated social spaces. In such contexts, meetings serve to formalize prior agreements rather than facilitate open debate. Women's participation becomes procedural and formal rather than deliberative and creative to minimize gender gap.

Time constraints mainly for women also limits effective engagement. Studies show that women spend more time on unpaid domestic work, fuelwood collection, and caregiving (Agarwal, 2010; Dahal et al., 2022). These responsibilities reduce the access on information, time and initiations available for governance activities. Male out-migration has increased women's workload in household activities and forest management. Therefore, it has not proportionally expanded their authority in decision-making.

Leadership disparities among social groups at local level remain evident in many communities-based forestry program. Women may be appointed as committee members as per rules of community forestry. Their level of influence may vary depending on the institutional context and societal values. However, key leadership positions mainly in chairperson, secretary, and treasurer are still largely occupied by male is significant to explore gender gap. Women's quotas declared by forest Ain to have proportion participation in the forest users' group are often formally fulfilled. However, financial control and planning process still remain controlled by male leadership in the forest users group is persisted historically (Murer & Piccoli, 2022). This gap in real participation suggests that quota system may not have fundamentally assure participations. It may not have assured equal power exercises in community forestry. Further it may demand for marginalized group enhanced empowerment by education and capabilities to get equity-based community forestry outcomes.

From a capability perspective as explained by Amarty Sen, the key issue is the difference among being present and having real influence for better outcomes. Sen (1999) argues that empowerment requires real freedom to exercise agency. In many CFUGs, women face limits related to education and mobility, social confidence and acceptance, and rooted gender norms and perceptions (Agarwal, 2010; Nightingale, 2011). These social and cultural factors constrain their ability to convert representation into authority and power. Quota-based inclusion and participation in many sectors like community forestry may therefore legitimize governance structures without redistributing power and assurance of empowerment. Gender inequality in community forestry reflects broader patriarchal social relations and control. It is not simply an issue of a policy gap. It has also of deeper structural inequalities and power imbalances is practiced in the society historically. If the time burdens of women at the household level are not addressed, meaningful participation remains difficult. Informal decision-making practices and limited leadership development also restrict their influence on public space. As a result of social and cultural burden women's participation is likely to remain symbolic rather than transformative.

### **Caste and Class Exclusion in Community Forestry**

Caste hierarchies and restrictions remain central to rural social organization and community development work in Nepal. These caste- based hierarchies around Nepal influenced in participation, leadership, and benefit distribution within Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs). However, CFUGs are legally defined as inclusive institutions by policy. Research shows that governance outcomes and participations in decision making reflect existing social stratification. So-called higher-caste groups in Nepal, particularly Brahmin, Thakuri, and Chhetri households, are often overrepresented in executive committees and hold decisive power. Locally dominant ethnic communities and wealthier families also hold more leadership positions without caste connection. Inequalities exist not only among caste groups but also within ethnic communities need to be explored which is ignore in mainstreaming research. Upper-caste, local ethnic, and socio-economic elite groups frequently occupy key positions such as chairperson, secretary, and treasurer (Malla, 2001; Iversen et al., 2006).

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Executive members mainly from higher castes and rich by land households-controlled timber harvesting permits and captured a substantial share of timber income in Terai Community forest (Iversen et al. (2006). Poorer and so called lower-caste households, despite formal membership, received fewer economic benefits and social support. This pattern suggests that access to forest revenue and further outcomes is influenced by social position rather than equal rights as describe by policy.

Caste-based exclusion reinforces economic inequality in Nepal. Field studies shows that both direct and indirect forms of marginalization affecting Dalit households. Dalits are often discouraged from speaking in meetings and excluded from informal discussions where decisions are made ((Lama & Buchy, 2002). Access to high-value timber is typically concentrated among higher-caste users because they have knowledge of its importance more. On the other hand, Dalit households depend on more on low-value products such as fuelwood and livestock fodder. Caste norms influence everyday interactions during CFUG activities. These restrictive practices reproduce both symbolic and material exclusion.

Class inequality also affects participation and decision-making processes. Poorer households face higher opportunity costs when engaging in community forestry (Adhikari and Lovett (2006). As their, attendance at meetings, forest patrolling, and compliance with regulations require time and labor. For household's dependent on daily wage work, these demands reduce income opportunities to sustain their daily livelihood. Access to land for economic status and education for knowledge helped people benefit from community forestry. Social networks also improved these outcomes. Comparatively, rich and higher-caste households generally possess stronger bureaucratic literacy and legal provisions. They have access to have closer connections to forestry officials and predetermined rules. These resources enable them to influence operational plans and benefit-sharing rules and regulations (Malla, 2001). Dalits and poorer households often lack the capital, resources and connections needed to chance membership into real benefits. These findings suggest that structural barriers are may play role to equal sharing and ownership in community forestry.

Decentralization on community forestry and resources management does not automatically reduce inequality alone. CFUGs often reproduce existing caste and class hierarchies within a participatory framework is not properly explored.

### **Migration and Changing Power Relations**

Migration has become a major force influencing rural society in Nepal mainly since 1990s. Over the past two decades, large-scale labor migration has increased significantly.

Many people have migrated to the Gulf countries, Malaysia, East Asia, Australia, Canada, and America. This migration has transformed household economies and local institutions.

National data show that many rural households depend on remittances as a primary source of income (Dahal et al., 2022). This change has transformed labor availability and patterns of responsibility within local communities also impact on activities of community forestry.

Research shows that migration has changed age, caste and ethnicity and gender-based participation in Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs). Women and elderly members take on more forest-related responsibilities due to the

absence of working men in village. Pattern of migration impact on participation in community forestry. These absences reflect on attending meetings, patrolling forests, and fulfilling with operational rules by the community side. Women's labor contributions in migrant-sending households have increased significantly (Sunam et al., 2013). However, increased labor responsibility has not resulted in equal decision-making authority.

Remittances also influence on class relations at the house hold level within members of CFUGs. Households receiving stable remittance income accumulate greater economic resources. Their dependence on forest products often declines slightly. At the same time, their financial position by the available of remittance can enhance their institutional influence. Studies show that remittance-receiving households are more possible to hold leadership roles. It influences decisions through social and political network (Sunam et al., 2013). Similarly, households without migration opportunities remain highly dependent on forest resources due to the causes of alternative sources of income. These families frequently contribute substantial labor at local level for forest protection. However, they may have limited influence over benefit-sharing decisions because of poverty. Income diversification through migration has reduced collective incentives for equitable power sharing (Shin et al., 2022).

Migration also affects deliberative processes in the various task of community forestry. Meeting attendance now includes more women and elderly members due to male migration. However, decisions may reflect preferences formed by absent but influential male migrants. Authority becomes separated from daily participation. Responsibility for labor does not always correspond to control over decisions. Migration challenges assumptions that decentralization leads to empowerment at present context of Nepal. It may remind us authority can be reorganized through economic capital and extended networks rather than direct engagement. Community forestry institutions were originally designed around stable rural livelihoods. However, rapid mobility from rural areas and income diversification have changed this foundation. Governance structures adapt slowly and often favor economically advantaged social groups. However, it can be concluding that migration and livelihood change are central to understanding current community forestry governance in Nepal. It reshapes patterns of participation, influence, and responsibility.

### **Governance and Power in Practice**

Community forestry policy in Nepal promotes participatory decision-making from the grassroots level. Theoretically, it assures equal participation and benefit sharing to the local people. However, empirical research shows that everyday governance and activities regarding community forestry is strongly influenced by informal power relations. It indicates that executive committee meetings often serve as negotiation spaces in informal level. Socially dominant actors frequently prepared decisions before formal meeting (Ojha et al., 2009). Meetings may then help to confirm and formalize prior informal agreements rather than further discussion. Banjade et al. (2010) find that disadvantage groups, especially women, Dalits, and poorer households rarely challenge executive decisions and raised their dissatisfactions. Fear of social exclusion and marginalization reduces open disagreement and objections. Consequently, hierarchical relations among members of community forestry are reproduced under the language of consensus and instrumental participations.

Despite decentralization on forest reforms, state agencies keep influence based on technical support. Forest officials influence governance on community forestry through approval of operational plans, deciding harvesting quotas, and compliance monitoring. These governmental procedures and central authority-imposed authority in the local level

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(Kanel & Dahal, 2008). Community leaders who are associated with political parties are often better positioned to influence decisions. Those with higher education, language skills, and familiarity with regulatory procedures are also better able to negotiate with forest officials. This type of political imposed emphasizes internal inequalities within CFUGs. Participation in community forestry must therefore be understood as a social practice. It is shaped by power and unequal access to resources. Interestingly, formal democratic procedures coexist with informal hierarchies.

## **Discussion**

This review shows that Nepal's community forestry program primarily has achieved forest recovery than before. It enlarged and strengthen institutional decentralization op power on resource management through community forestry. At the same time different research shows that it has reproduced significant social inequalities among local people in governance outcomes and profit sharing from community forestry program. Policy frameworks emphasize inclusion, participation, and equitable benefit sharing from the community forestry (Pokharel & Byrne, 2009). However, empirical literature shows that inequalities in some extent continue within community forestry. Gender-based power gaps remain its evident. Caste and class stratification also persist in benefit sharing and decision making. Bureaucratic influence and migration-related inequalities further shape governance outcomes unequally is significant when evaluation of community forestry program.

These findings challenge narratives that describe community forestry as inherently transformative and inclusive program in Nepal. Instead, the inclusive slogan of community forestry operates within Nepal's broader history of hierarchy and unequal relations. It also functions within the continuing influence of state authority. Across the reviewed studies, women's participation in community forestry is often linked to policy requirements. However, it reflects limited structural transformation among local communities from social hindrance.

Gender based quotas have increased women's representation in executive committees is significant. However, governance practices remain influenced by patriarchal norms, values and expectations (Agarwal, 2010). It looks women attend meetings, perform forest management tasks, and ensure rule obedience properly. However, control over timber harvesting, financial allocation, and strategic planning largely remains with male leaders and economically elite households (Nightingale, 2011). It shows structural obstacle to minimize gender gap in community forestry.

This pattern of inequality, participations and difference among formal inclusion and substantive empowerment reflect need of agency centered development practices. Sen's (1999) capability approach clarifies that representation does not ensure agency. Women must possess the real freedom to influence decisions for better outcomes from community forest. Unlimited household work for women and gendered expectations from the society limit their effective participation in the community forestry.

Studies on community forest sector persistent elite dominance in executive positions that affect decision making processes (Malla, 2001). Upper caste and economically secure households are more possible to made decisions in community forestry. Mainly it applies in commercially valuable forests (Luintel et al., 2017). Dalits and poorer households face barriers to meaningful participation. These include exclusion from powerful networks, limited access to valuable forest products, and less capability to challenge decisions. (Dev et al., 2003).

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital explains these patterns happened within marginal groups. Economic capital can turn into institutional advantage. Similarly, cultural capital and social networks also provide benefits. Symbolic status of certain social groups further strengthens their institutional position. CFUGs operate as social spaces for certain groups where accumulated capital strengthens leadership claims for the privileged groups.

Decentralization and power sharing have not eliminated state influence in the case of community forestry. Forest officials influence governance through plans, rules, and technical procedures (Banjade et al., 2010). On the other hand, these processes of access on power privilege those who are educated, have bureaucratic literacy, and familiarity with legal procedures. Executive committees often adopt formal deliberative procedures only. However, decisions may be shaped through informal negotiations before meetings occur is hidden factor that may impact to the committee's decisions. Migration reshapes power relations in community forestry. Remittances raise household status and allow absent migrants to influence decisions. women and elderly members take on more forest work without gaining equal authority.

The reviewed evidence shows a gap among policy and governance practice at local level. Legal empowerment and inclusion mechanisms have not removed rooted social hierarchies which based on mainly caste and gender and persisted historically. Decision-making context remain socially structured rather expectations of legal provisions. Voices of different social groups in decision making processes and their influences continue to be unevenly distributed. Researcher suggests that participatory governance can function as a legitimacy framework that masks inequality and exclusion (Malla, 2001; Ojha et al., 2009).

Research shows that community forestry in Nepal has improved forest conservation and supports to the rural livelihood. However, social outcomes from community forestry remain uneven and diverse. Gender, caste, and class hierarchies and its social practices continue to influence participation and leadership within CFUGs further need to be addressed to assess power relations in the community forestry. It indicates that formal inclusion does not always result in real decision-making power (Lama & Buchy, 2002). Evidence further indicates that forests have regenerated, poverty reduction benefits remain limited for poorer and Dalit households (Devkota, Thwaites, & Race, 2018). In addition, increasing state oversight and market pressures influence local autonomy and benefit-sharing practices at local level (Paudel, 2019). Community forestry should be seen as a politically shaped social institution. Formal rules operate alongside informal norms and power relations that influence outcomes in practice of community forestry. Improving equity requires more than procedural reforms in the community forestry. Structural inequalities must be addressed to make it equity based support system for rural livelihood. Institutional arrangements and its capacity for community-based forestry must expand through real agency at the local level. This can be strengthened by education and knowledge. Therefore, real participation in community forestry user groups, grounded in capability, should involve meaningful deliberation and the equitable distribution of benefits. It may ensure shared ownership of local resources among different social groups.

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative review shows that Nepal's community forestry program has achieved significant progress in forest recovery and institutional innovation for people centered development. However, its social outcomes people-based and caste and gender remain uneven is significant issue for further research. Although formal participation has expanded to allow local use of forest resources through participatory approach. Fundamental social relations

continue to influence leadership, power, and benefit distribution within Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) which is significant for policy making research. Gender hierarchy, caste and class stratification, bureaucratic influence, and migration-driven economic change continue to privilege socially advantaged groups.

Power devolution as a form of decentralization from the center alone is insufficient to transform rooted power relations of the society. Women's representation remains nominal in decision making processes either at household level or in public space. Dalits and poorer households are also face structural barriers. It influencing participations and benefit sharing in community forestry. Power remains with socially advantaged groups who have greater resources, networks, social status, and knowledge. These advantages enable them to gain and maintain authority to use local resources like community forest. Migration has redistributed labor responsibilities without redistributing decision-making power which is significant in the current context of Nepal. The study further contributes to debates on participatory governance in developing countries. Participation in community forestry is not just about how institutions are formally designed. It is a socially embedded practice formed by historical inequality and political economy. Environmental governance must therefore be analyzed as a social challenged. This perspective challenges common views of participation and call of critical evaluation.

The findings have several policy implications for community forestry program. Community forestry should be evaluated as a socio-political institution. Inclusion policies initiated by government and non-government sectors should move beyond numerical representation to capability-based participation. This enables real influence in decision-making and accountability mechanisms. It can be concluded that migration and livelihood diversification should be recognized as central governance factors. Assuring and expanding social justice within community forestry requires deliberate efforts to strengthening the capacities of women, Dalits, and poorer households is highly significant. Participation in community forestry must change from formal procedures to substantive empowerment and change. Such reforms can help community forestry achieve ecological sustainability, support rural livelihoods, and strengthen democratic governance and participation. Present analysis show that community forestry in Nepal has helped protect and improve forest conditions is significant achievement. However, the benefits are not shared equally among social groups which raised major question to the government and other stakeholders when examine its proper implications. Social factors such as gender and caste influence decision-making of community forestry program. Similarly, economic status and local leadership also shape who makes decisions and get benefits is significant at the time of evaluation of community forestry program. These factors determine who make benefits most from forest resources. Because of these practices on community forestry, unequal power relations and inequality remains central to understanding how community forestry has evolved over time.

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