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When the Men Are Away: Migration and Women's Participation in Nepal's Community Forestry

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Studies of migration and gender have focused mostly on changes at the household level, where they have found women's experience to be mixed, with greater autonomy in decision-making but also a greater work burden and increased stress. Little is known about migration's impact on community-level gender relations. This study of 10 forest user groups in 3 districts of Nepal, experiencing different levels of migration, investigated changes within migrant and nonmigrant households and how they impact people's participation in local forest user groups. We found a slight increase in women's participation in the groups' general assemblies, especially among nuclear households with at least 1 migrant member. However, male migration did not seem to increase women's access to those groups' executive committees, where most decisions are made. Traditional gender norms, institutional requirements that privilege literacy and men's networking skills, and men's entrenched control of local forestry institutions continue to limit women's participation in community forestry. Women with migrant husbands also suffer disproportionately from time poverty, which further limits their engagement in activities outside the home.

***Keywords**: Gender; migration; community forestry; participation in decision-making; time poverty; Nepal; Sustainable Development Goals; Agenda 2030.*

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Community forestry, gender, and migration

There is now a substantial body of work on gender and forest governance that focuses on women's participation in decision-making, their constraints, and other gender equity issues (Agrawal 2001; Sarin 2001; Nightingale 2002; Buchy and Subba 2003; Agrawal 2010; Khadka et al 2014). Women's participation in community forestry is important as an end in itself and because women are key forest users with major stakes in forest governance.

Initiated in the 1970s, Nepal's community forestry program has been deemed a success in terms of increasing forest cover and establishing local communities' control of forest governance (Gautam and Shivakoti 2005). There are currently 17,685 community forest user groups (FUGs) in Nepal, involving more than 1.6 million households (MFSC 2013), which have registered to protect, manage, and use parts of nationally owned forest land.

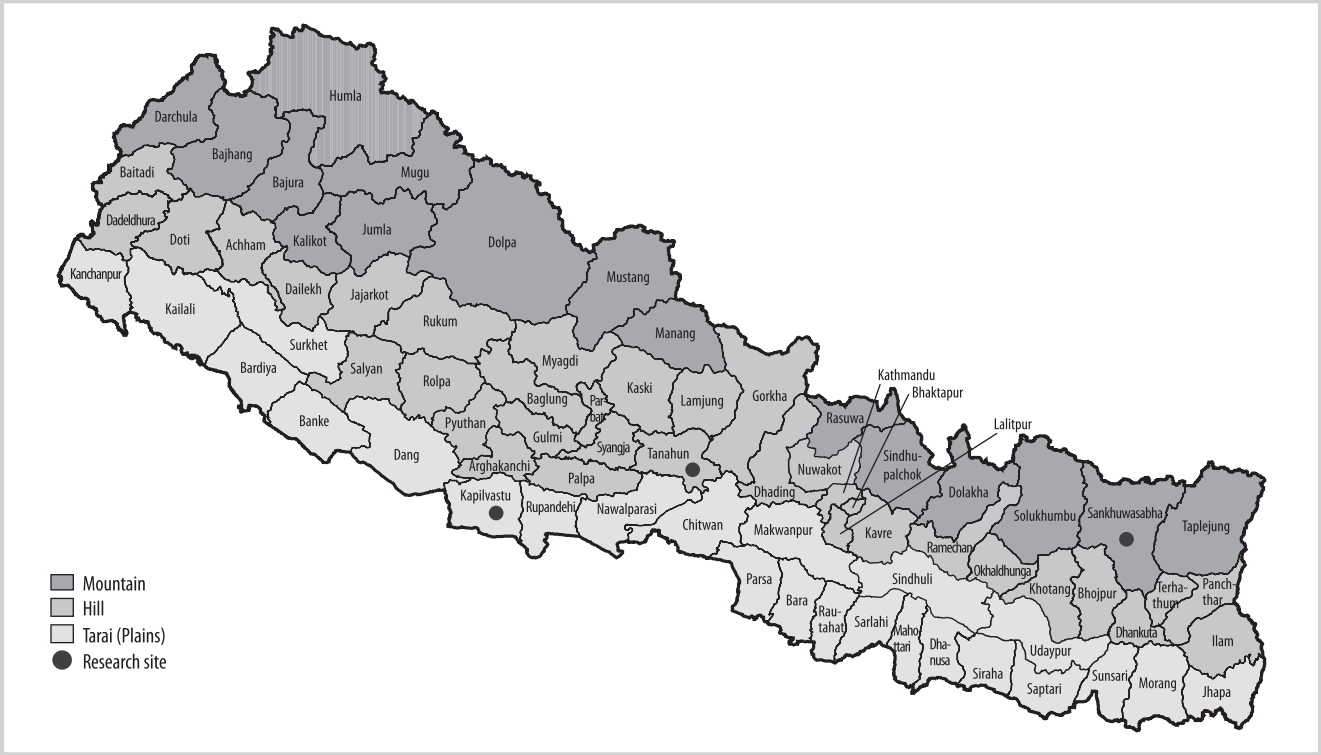
Studies of gender, migration, forestry, and livelihoods have emphasized the need to take migration more seriously (Sijapati-Basnett 2011; Maharjan et al 2012). Sijapati-Basnett (2013) argued that forest policies continue to be based on the premise that rural livelihoods are physically and socially bounded and do not consider how migration is affecting forest governance. External migration in Nepal jumped from 200,000 in the 1950s to approximately 2 million in 2011 (Sharma et al 2014). Most migrants are men, accounting for 95.7% of the labor migration permits issued in the years 2008–2015 (MoLE 2016).

The literature on gender and migration focuses mostly on changes at the household level and paints a mixed picture. On the positive side, women with migrant husbands have greater autonomy and decision-making authority at the household level due to their husbands' absence (Kaspar 2006; Yabiku et al 2010). On the other hand, they face an increased work burden and are relegated more completely to the domestic sphere (Maharjan et al 2012; Deenen et al 2015). The division of labor established through the husbands' migration further reinforces gender inequality, as men's role as breadwinners and primary decision-makers is strengthened (Menjivar and Agadjainian 2007; Rashid 2013). In addition, women in migrant households confront new forms of moral policing, either real or perceived, from their migrant husbands and their community (Boehm 2008; McEvoy et al 2012).

There are gaps in the knowledge of migration's impact on gender relations at the community level. Does the absence of men make women more visible and valuable? This article focuses on the gendered implications of male migration by looking at how women's participation in

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FIGURE 1 Map of Nepal showing district boundaries, ecological zones, and research sites. (Map by Chiran Ghimire)



community forestry has changed—focusing in particular on the FUGs' main decision-making bodies, the general assembly and the executive committee. The general assembly, held once (sometimes twice) a year, is an opportunity for FUG members to hold executive committee members and each other accountable. The executive committee, which usually meets once a month, handles the day-to-day functions of the FUG. Our research results suggest that although women's presence in the FUG general assembly has increased due to male migration, they still do not have much impact on decision-making because of the changed household structure as well as socially embedded community structures, both of which constrain their participation.

The findings of this study are relevant to the Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2015), in particular the goals of sustainably managing forests (Goal 15) and achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls (Goal 5). These goals are interlinked in a mountain context like Nepal, where people are still highly dependent on agriculture and, by extension, on forestry, despite the inflow of remittances from labor migrants. This study also has wider applicability, since male migration is accelerating in other mountain regions as well (ICIMOD 2009).

Research methods and study sites

The study used a mixed-methods approach to data collection. Data collection took place between August and October 2015.

The quantitative data were collected in 10 FUGs in 3 districts representing Nepal's 3 ecological zones: Sankhuwasabha (27°21′59.99″N; 87°12′60.00″E) in the mountains, Tanahun (27°56′40.94″N; 84°13′40.37″E) in the hills, and Kapilvastu (27°33′6.47″N; 83°02′48.76″E) in the Tarai (plains) (Figure 1). Of the total 10 FUGs in 3 districts, 6 were in areas with high migration rates and 4 in areas with low migration rates. To select the study FUGs, first, we identified the wards in each study district with the highest and lowest migration rates, using ward-level data from the 2011 National Census on absentee population (defined as individuals who had been abroad for 6 or more months prior to the date of enumeration) as a proxy for migration rates (Sharma et al 2014). In all 3 districts, 2 high-migration FUGs were selected randomly from a sample of 10 FUGs from high-migration wards. In Sankhuwasabha and Tanahun, 2 low-migration FUGs per district were likewise randomly selected as a control group (Table 1). In each sampled FUG, 25 migrant and 25 nonmigrant households were randomly selected. A total of 500 households were surveyed.

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TABLE 1 Characteristics of forest user groups surveyed during the study.[a)]

FUG	District	Migration status	Absentee rate	Community forest area (ha)	Year registered	Number of member households	Forest type
1	Sankhuwasabha	High	11.7	45	1994	150	Natural
2	Sankhuwasabha	High	11.7	356	1995	143	Natural
3	Sankhuwasabha	Low	7.5	513	1995	219	Natural
4	Sankhuwasabha	Low	6.2	43	1991	156	Natural
5	Tanahun	High	20.6	218	1996	145	Natural
6	Tanahun	High	22.6	70	1995	280	Natural and plantation
7	Tanahun	Low	7.8	155	2000	192	Natural and plantation
8	Tanahun	Low	0.4	139	1997	175	Natural and plantation
9	Kapilvastu	High	18.7	182	1998	374	Natural and plantation
10	Kapilvastu	High	7.8	90	1992	457	Plantation

[a)] Sources: CBS 2011 (absentee rate column) and CBS 2012.

Qualitative fieldwork was conducted in 2 high-migration FUGs. Their names have been changed to maintain participants' privacy; for the purpose of this article we will call them Hile in Tanahun and Peke in Sankhuwasabha. A total of 49 interviews and 8 focus group discussions were conducted with executive committee members, general forest users, migrant household members, forest officials, and donor-funded forestry project staff. A similar qualitative study in Kapilvastu district was planned but could not be conducted because of severe disturbances related to the drafting of Nepal's new constitution.

Hile community forest covers more than 218 hectares of natural forest; the FUG has around 145 member households. Its annual budget is US$ 1300, and its main source of income is sale of timber. Peke community forest covers 45 hectares and is mainly covered by *sal* (*Shorea robusta*) trees. Initially the Peke FUG received a good income from timber sales, but since then this resource has been over-harvested, and all that remains are younger trees that are currently being protected. Now the FUG's sources of income are membership fees and the sale of firewood to members.

Findings

Women's participation in the general assembly

The most visible impact of mass male migration on local forestry institutions is the increased presence of women in village meetings like the FUG general assembly. Our survey compared 4 types of households: nuclear (with at most 1 married couple and their unmarried children) and extended (larger) households, with and without at least 1 migrant family member. Of these, women's participation in the general assembly was highest among nuclear migrant households. In Kapilvastu district, 75% of nuclear migrant households, but only 22.2% of nuclear nonmigrant households, were represented by women in the general assembly. The pattern is similar in the 2 other districts but less pronounced (Table 2).

The general assembly, however, is not the main decision-making body in either Hile or Peke FUG, where its primary function appears to be reaffirming decisions made by the executive committee. Asked if general forest users make decisions in the FUG, a young woman from a nuclear migrant household in Hile FUG, who was quite active in the community, said,

> *We don't have to do that. The executive committee discusses and makes decisions. If there is time, they ask. If not, they don't. They make it themselves. There are bigger people than us who know much more. The executive committee asks them, and whatever they say we agree. They do not need to ask us.*
>
> *(interview no. 25, 30 September 2015)*

Only a few individuals who are not in the executive committee, men or women, actively participate in the general assembly. Women's participation—and that of most men—in the general assembly was said to be passive, and their reason for showing up was often only to ensure household representation. This was evident in what a woman said during a focus group discussion with women forest users in Peke FUG:

> *Women don't speak up in the assembly … they think that men will discuss and make decisions, so they just go and leave before the assembly ends.*
>
> *(focus group discussion 1, 3 October 2015)*

Nevertheless, the general assembly is a major source of information about the FUG, such as the date the forest will open for harvesting and the annual income and

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TABLE 2 Participation in the general assembly by gender of household representative and migration status of household.

District	Type of household	Primary participant (% of households)		
		Man	Woman	Woman goes when man is busy
Sankhuwasabha	Nuclear migrant	64.1	32.1	3.8
	Extended migrant	86	11.6	2.4
	Nuclear nonmigrant	66.6	25.5	7.9
	Extended nonmigrant	80	20	0
Tanahun	Nuclear migrant	32.2	51.6	16.2
	Extended migrant	34.3	51.4	14.3
	Nuclear nonmigrant	65.5	31	3.5
	Extended nonmigrant	43.4	36.9	19.7
Kapilvastu	Nuclear migrant	25	75	0
	Extended migrant	52.1	43.8	4.1
	Nuclear nonmigrant	77.8	22.2	0
	Extended nonmigrant	71.8	21.9	6.3

expenditures of the FUG. Of the surveyed households, 49% said that the general assembly was among their top 3 sources of information about the forest. Other major sources of information were executive committee members in one's own settlement (mentioned by 54% of survey respondents) and forest guards hired by the FUG (38%). However, general forest users had much less information than executive committee members about what was happening in the FUG, especially in relation to external interventions and the FUG's relations with the forest department and other external agents.

Women's participation in the executive committee

In the FUGs covered by the study, migration does not seem to have had an impact on the gender composition of the executive committees; women's participation was actually somewhat higher in low-migration FUGs (Table 3). In the FUGs surveyed, 1 of the top 4 or 5 positions in the executive committee was held by a woman; only 1 had a woman chairperson. One low-migration FUG in Tanahun was primarily led by women, who also made up 88.9% of the membership. High women's participation was mostly due to contextual factors like the leadership of a few women in the locality and the fact that the FUG was located near the highway, with local men engaged in trades and businesses that limited their community engagement.

Women's participation in the executive committees has increased since the initial years of community forestry (MFSC 2013). Executive committee members often pointed to affirmative-action policies, rather than male migration, as the reason for this inclusivity. The 2009 *Guidelines for Community Forestry Development Programme* (MFSC 2009; henceforth, the 2009 Guidelines) require that women make up half of the executive committee and that either the chairperson or secretary of the executive committee must be a woman. However, implementation of this provision is uneven, as can be seen in Table 3. Even when women are in the executive committee, they are often there as figureheads. For instance, in Hile FUG, there were 2 women executive committee members, both in their 60s. One of them has been the treasurer for the last 5 years, but all her responsibilities have been handled by the chairperson and other male executive committee members. She did not

TABLE 3 Women's participation in executive committees in high- and low-migration forest user groups.

District	High migration	Low migration	
		Primarily women-led	Other
Sankhuwasabha	16.7% (2 FUGs)	–	20.8% (2 FUGs)
Tanahun	17.4% (2 FUGs)	88.9% (1 FUG)	38.5% (1 FUG)
Kapilvastu	46.7% (2 FUGs)	–	–

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know much about what went on in the executive committee, but simply signed documents when asked to by the chairperson and secretary. A few years earlier, she had served as the chairperson of a local mothers' group. Neither woman expressed interest in the post they held.

Barriers to participation

Although forest policies have increasingly promoted the inclusion of women in the executive committees, it has not been easy for women to participate in FUG decision-making. Women do not automatically move into the political spaces that male migration creates. Some of this is due to the changed conditions brought about by migration, but it usually has to do with structural issues that the community forestry program has not been able to address, as discussed below.

Time poverty: Lack of time is a major constraint for women in households with male migrants. Scholars have used the concept of "time poverty" to refer to the lack of time women face due to the labor they are engaged in for household production and reproduction (Kes and Swaminathan 2006; Saqib and Arif 2012). It is particularly difficult for women in nuclear migrant households, who do not have other adult family members living with them, and even more so for those with young children. Extra-household engagements are not limited to FUGs but can extend to many other community-level activities. A woman from a nuclear migrant household said:

> *There is hardly any free time. … We can't even attend to our own work. … There are all kinds of meetings, some related to development and mothers' group meetings. Now, we have to go daily [to work on] the drinking water [project] for the next 4 months. It will then be time to plant beans. Will we be able to take care of it or will we have to run to meetings?*
>
> *(interview no. 23, 1 October 2015)*

General assembly meetings often last for 4–5 hours, and many women do not stay till the end. Executive committee meetings are even more frequent and time consuming. For women in nuclear migrant households, spending long hours in such meetings is a challenge because of their increased household work burden. In Hile FUG, there were young women leaders, but they were more active in the health and sanitation interventions, which are often targeted to women, as men are reluctant to participate because the sector is linked to women's traditional role as caregivers (Pandey and Moffet 2005). The chairperson of the FUG said that one of these women could be a potential executive committee member, but that she had young children and would not be able to find the time.

Domination by elite men: Local forest governance in Nepal has always been dominated by men from advantaged castes and ethnicities (Agrawal 2001; Lama and Buchy 2002; Nightingale 2002; Agrawal 2010). Men's reluctance to give up executive committee positions is often higher in higher-income FUGs. In Hile, a high-income FUG, there was a major conflict among the executive committee members over following the 2009 Guidelines. Older men of the dominant ethnic group opposed it because they thought there were no women who had the capability and the time to hold an executive position. Findings from other areas in Nepal also suggest that older and elite men tend to be more active in richer and more productive FUGs, with the poor and women users having no say in crucial decisions on the use of FUG funds (Maskey et al 2006; Adhikari and DiFalco 2008).

Even though elite men in the executive committee may be selected by consensus from the general assembly, they are seen as the natural candidates for these positions because they are able to command authority locally and have good relations with district forest officials and other external agents. They also have more time to devote to leadership roles.

In both high- and low-migration FUGs in our study, the executive committee was dominated by men. Most were 40 years or older (Table 4). As a majority of the men who migrate fall in the age group 18–40, their migration does not impact the composition of the executive committee. Also, some the men in leadership positions have held them for more than 2 decades.

In addition, as local elections have not taken place for the last 16 years, the FUG has become an important political platform, and its top positions are coveted by local leaders. This has led to the politicization of the executive committee, with executive committee positions being filled based on political affiliation. Women's low political engagement makes it difficult for them to compete for these positions. Although executive committee members lament the absence of youth in the village and are worried about the future leadership of the FUG, they are reluctant to train young women.

Exclusionary institutions: Despite the forestry sector's goal to make FUGs more inclusionary by creating quotas for women in decision-making positions, as outlined in the 2009 Guidelines, many informal rules of the game that serve as barriers to leadership for women and marginalized groups are still intact. Even when women are kept in decision-making positions, their roles can be limited, as was the case of Hile FUG. Both men and women cited illiteracy, low self-esteem, and lack of ability to handle administrative responsibilities (such as going to the district headquarters and dealing with external agents) as major barriers to women's participation in executive committees. As a chairperson of an FUG in Sankhuwasabha said:

> *Even if you put women in the committee, if they have to be sent to some other place for training they will not be able to speak and write in front of others. Due to lack of education they will not take advantage of the opportunities that come to them.*
>
> *(interview no. 38, 18 August 2015)*

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TABLE 4 Age composition of executive committees in high- and low-migration forest user groups.

District	Age (%)				
	20–29 years	30–39 years	40–49 years	50–59 years	60+ years
High-migration FUGs					
Sankhuwasabha (2)	0	6.2	31.3	37.5	25
Tanahun (2)	0	13	26.1	17.4	43.5
Kapilvastu (2)	0	26.7	23.3	30	20
Low-migration FUGs					
Sankhuwasabha (2)	12.5	8.3	25	25	29.2
Tanahun (1)	23.1	30.8	30.7	7.7	7.7
Low-migration primarily women-led FUG					
Tanahun (1)	44.5	33.3	11.1	0	11.1

In a similar vein, a district forest official explained why it was difficult to implement the inclusivity mandated in the 2009 Guidelines:

> *It is clearly written that in one vital post, there should be a woman. But to be a treasurer, the person would also need knowledge of finance and accounts. There are [FUGs] where we have failed to find any such person.*
>
> *(interview no. 34, 6 October 2015)*

Such challenges not only prevent women from joining decision-making bodies, but also limit their access to resources like training and information. But despite the human resource and budgetary constraints forest officials face, there are some inspiring initiatives. For instance, a forest official in Tanahun district had been conducting workshops every 2 months, at the village development committee level, for FUG executive committee members to share issues and ideas. Each FUG was asked to send 3 participants, and it was compulsory that 1 be a woman (another such initiative is described in Denholm Gurung 2002). However, such initiatives depend entirely on the interest and commitment of individual forest officials and are not promoted by policymakers higher up.

Discussion

This study found that women's participation in the general assembly is higher for nuclear migrant households than for nonmigrant and extended households. Pointing out similar trends, Giri and Darnhofer (2010) found that women with migrant husbands in nuclear households are 43 times more likely to attend the general assembly than those in extended migrant households, and 4 times more likely to voice their opinion. Maharjan et al (2012) noted a breakdown in traditional gender divisions of labor in agriculture because of migration. Household structure also has a bearing on the level of increase in women's autonomy. In extended households, a migrant's wife's autonomy can be curtailed by the influence of other family members, such as adult male relatives or her mother-in-law (Brink 1991; Desai and Banerji 2008).

Although women's increased presence in the general assembly is encouraging, the general assembly itself has limited potential as a political space. This has implications for gender relations and overall forest governance. As the executive committee meets every month and the general assembly only once a year, most FUG decision-making is done by the executive committee. As members are scattered across settlements, well-attended general assemblies are often difficult to organize (Agrawal 2010). Hence, increased women's presence in the general assembly may not say much about their reach in decision making.

Women's participation in executive committees was lower in high-migration FUGs. Lack of time was a major issue, especially for women in nuclear migrant households. Saqib and Arif (2012) defined individuals to be time poor if they spent more than 10.5 hours a day on committed activities like income generation, household maintenance, care work, and community services, and they found that time poverty among rural women in Pakistan who do unpaid work on their family farms is 5 times greater than among their male counterparts, because they spend a lot more time in care work. Studies in Nepal and elsewhere have detailed women's increased household burden because of male migration (Maharjan et al 2012; Deenen et al 2015). Thus, migration may be having a negative impact on women's participation in the executive committee because they are too busy at home (Agrawal 2010). Although more recent community forestry policies have tried to increase the number of women in executive positions in FUGs, the structure of the executive committee and the decision-making processes in FUGs that often exclude women and

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marginalized groups remain unchanged by either policy changes or increased male migration.

In her seminal study in Gujurat and Nepal, Agrawal (2010) found that when there are more women in the executive committee there is a greater chance that women will attend meetings, hold office in the executive committee, and speak up at meetings. A survey of 137 FUGs in 47 districts of Nepal (MFSC 2013) found that 40% of the executive committee members were women, whereas 13% of the chairpersons, 29% of the secretaries, and 40% of the treasurers were women. The study found that these top 3 positions were dominated by men from dominant caste/ethnic groups. Even in the position of treasurer, where there was significant female representation, this was dominated by high-caste women (MFSC 2013). Agrawal (2010) found that having more landless women in the executive committee increased the probability of more women attending meetings and speaking up, since access to community forest is of vital importance to them, and they are also less constrained by gendered norms than high-caste women. Hence, it is important to advocate not only for women's participation in general but for participation by women from lower castes, marginalized ethnic groups, and poor households.

Studies in other regions have found that just because men are physically absent does not mean that gender relations in the household will become more equal and relaxed (Menjivar and Agadjainian 2007; McEnvoy et al 2012). There is a need to pay attention to women and gender issues in the FUG and the forestry sector as a whole, taking into consideration the changed local context due to migration. Increasing women's participation in FUGs in the face of increased household burdens, which are largely unrecognized, will be challenging. Valuing unpaid care and domestic work, as well as women's time and voice is highly important. This can be done by providing public services, infrastructure, and social protection policies that reduce the time women spend on care and domestic work and by making concrete efforts to change gender norms related to household division of labor (UN 2015). Additionally, to facilitate women's participation in decision-making, there is a need to relax restrictive administrative requirements, devise women-friendly extension methods, and create incentives for innovative approaches. Further research is required to understand how gender relations change upon migrants' return and how forest use and dependence on communal resources are changing in the context of migration.

Conclusion

Although migration has gendered implications for community forestry, it does not appear to have improved women's position in forest governance, as is generally assumed. There has been some increase in women's attendance in FUG general assemblies, especially among nuclear migrant households, but this has not necessarily improved women's roles in the FUG because these assemblies offer only limited decision-making power. Major decisions in the FUG are taken by few people in the executive committee, and women's participation in executive committees is somewhat higher in low-migration FUGs than in high-migration FUGs. Women with migrant husbands also suffer disproportionately from time poverty, which further limits their engagement in activities outside of the home. Hence, migration might have a negative impact on women's participation in FUG decision-making, especially when not much is being done to tackle the structural issues that limit women's engagement. Gendered social norms, institutional requirements that privilege literacy and men's networking skills, and men's entrenched control of local forestry institutions, continue to limit women's participation in FUG decision-making. Although forest policies such as the 2009 Guidelines require the inclusion of women in executive committees, this participation remains low, and many of the women who do serve are token representatives without the corresponding authority.

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