

# Power, Rules, Access, and Gender: Women's Inclusion in Community Forest Benefits – Policy to Practice

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**Abstract**— Forests are more than just trees; they are lifelines. For millions in Nepal, especially women, community forests provide food, fuel, medicine, and essential livelihood opportunities. However, critical questions remain: who decides how these forests are managed, and who truly benefits from them.

This study examines women's participation, access to benefits, and decision-making power within Nepal's community forestry system. Drawing on qualitative data collected from 19 Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) across four provinces, including mixed-gender and women-only groups, we conducted participatory workshops, group discussions, and community-level engagements to capture women's lived experiences beyond formal records. Our findings reveal a persistent gender gap between women's labor contributions and their access to authority and economic benefits. While women carry out most day-to-day forest-related work, men predominantly control income-generating activities such as timber sales and ecotourism. The study further highlights intersectional inequalities, showing that Dalit women, single women, and those from marginalized backgrounds face compounded barriers to participation, even within women-led institutions. Leadership positions are often occupied by women from elite castes, limiting broader inclusion. These exclusions not only undermine social justice but also weaken the effectiveness and sustainability of community forestry. The study proposes a set of practical indicators and a roadmap to assess and strengthen meaningful women's inclusion—focusing on voice in decision-making, equitable benefit sharing, and household- and community-level support mechanisms. By centering women's knowledge and agency, this research calls for a more inclusive and resilient model of community forestry in Nepal.

**Keywords**— Power, Rules, Access, Women, Community Forest, Leadership, Decision making

## I. INTRODUCTION

Forests play a vital role in global livelihoods and sustainability, supporting millions of people through ecosystem services and forest-based employment. Community-based Forest management (CBFM) has emerged as a key governance approach to address deforestation by devolving forest tenure and management rights to local communities (Arts, 2021). Globally, **approximately 15–33% of forest area** is under community or collective management, implemented through diverse institutional arrangements such as community forestry, joint forest management, social forestry, and buffer-zone management across Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Ghimire & Lamichhane, 2020; Bhushan et al., 2024). Empirical evidence suggests that CBFM can enhance forest condition and local livelihoods, although outcomes vary depending on governance quality, tenure security, and benefit-sharing mechanisms. Strengthening community tenure and inclusive governance remains critical for achieving equitable and sustainable forest management.

Nepal has **5.96 million ha of forest**, covering **40.36%** of its total land area (147,181 km<sup>2</sup>), of which **2.83 million ha (47.5%)** are managed under community-based forest management (CBFM) by approximately **4.2 million households**, representing over **28 million people** (DFRS, 2015; DoF, 2017). Initiated in the late 1970s through the community forestry program, CBFM has become a central mechanism for sustainable forest management by institutionalizing local



participation and tenure rights (Ghimire & Lamichhane, 2020). Nepal's CBFM framework comprises **six modalities**: Community Forestry, Leasehold Forestry, Collaborative Forest Management, Protected Forests, Buffer Zone Community Forestry, and Religious Forests—designed to balance ecological sustainability, economic viability, and social inclusion (DFRS, 2015).

Nepal's community-based forest management (CBFM) system comprises multiple modalities. **Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs)** dominate the regime, with **22,266 CFUGs managing 2.23 million ha (79.0%)** of total CBFM forest area. Other modalities include **7,484 leasehold forests** covering **43,317 ha (1.5%)** and supporting **71,753 poor households**; **30 collaborative forest management sites** in the Tarai managing **76,012 ha (2.7%)** and involving **864,015 households**; **608 buffer zone community forests** covering **144,010 ha** and benefiting **101,462 households**; **10 protected forests** (and proposed sites) covering **328,642 ha** and supporting **275,123 households**; and **36 religious forests** occupying **2,036 ha** (DoF, 2017). The scale of participation has reinforced policy attention toward expanding CBFM, with CFUGs widely recognized as one of the most effective models of participatory forest management in Nepal (Shrestha et al., 2010).

Research on environmental governance and collective action has largely emphasized conditions for successful cooperation in managing common-pool resources, with group heterogeneity mainly examined through class and caste, and gender receiving limited attention (Agarwal, 2009). While feminist and gender-focused scholarship has highlighted women's underrepresentation in forest governance and its implications for equity (Agarwal, 2001), it has often overlooked efficiency outcomes, including forest condition and women's access to forest benefits (Leone, 2019). However, evidence suggests that women differ from men in resource-use preferences, ecological knowledge, and dependence on forests (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Despite this, **analytical studies linking gender, governance, and outcomes in Nepal's community forestry remain scarce.**

This study aims to fill this research gap by developing criteria and indicators, based on field observations, data collection, and expert consultations, to measure women's effective access to and inclusion in the goods and services produced by CFUGs. The findings of this study will inform policy-level recommendations to ensure the sustainability of CFUGs in Nepal from a gender perspective.

## II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: WOMEN'S INCLUSION IN COMMUNITY FOREST BENEFITS

### 1) 2Core Problem: Structural and Institutional Gender Exclusion

Despite Nepal's internationally recognized community forestry model and progressive gender-sensitive policies, women's inclusion in Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) remains largely symbolic rather than substantive.

Women are frequently present in meetings and committees, yet their participation rarely translates into real decision-making authority. Executive Committees (ECs) continue to be dominated by men, particularly in key leadership positions such as Chairperson, Secretary, and Treasurer, where control over financial resources, planning, and external negotiations is concentrated. Even when women are included, they are often assigned auxiliary roles that reinforce traditional gender norms rather than challenge them.

Economic exclusion is equally pronounced. Women contribute significantly to forest management through unpaid labor—fuelwood collection, fodder gathering, fire control, and forest protection—but are systematically excluded from high-value benefits such as timber revenue, non-timber forest product (NTFP) enterprises, ecotourism initiatives, and forest-based contracts. Male elites or socially dominant groups typically capture these benefits.

Furthermore, gender exclusion is deeply intersectional. Dalit women, Janajati women, single women, widows, and women from remote or poorer households face multiple layers of discrimination rooted in caste hierarchies, class inequalities, marital status, and geographic marginalization. Elite capture by higher-caste women further reproduces inequities, masking exclusion under the appearance of gender inclusion while limiting genuine representativeness.

### 2) Contributing Factors

A combination of socio-cultural, institutional, and structural factors sustains women's marginalization in community forestry. Deeply entrenched patriarchal norms continue to define leadership, authority, and technical expertise as male domains. Women's voices are often dismissed, interrupted, or ignored during CFUG meetings, while social expectations restrict their mobility, public speaking, and engagement with external institutions such as forest offices or NGOs.

Although policies mandate gender quotas in CFUG leadership, a persistent policy implementation gap undermines their effectiveness. Quotas are often met numerically but not substantively, with little monitoring to ensure that women actually influence decisions. Enforcement mechanisms are weak, and forest officials often prioritize administrative compliance over transformative inclusion.

Institutional support for women remains inadequate. Gender-responsive budgeting is rare, and capacity-building programs are sporadic, poorly resourced, or captured by local elites. Many women lack access to leadership training, legal literacy, and technical forestry knowledge.

Informational asymmetry further entrenches exclusion. Financial records, operational plans, and benefit-sharing decisions are often inaccessible to women, either due to illiteracy barriers or deliberate withholding of information. Time poverty compounds these challenges, as women's unpaid domestic and care responsibilities limit their ability to attend meetings, trainings, or leadership roles, reinforcing a cycle of exclusion.

### 3) Consequences of Exclusion

The exclusion of women from meaningful participation in community forestry has far-reaching social, economic, and

ecological consequences. Socially, it perpetuates gendered, caste-based, and economic inequalities, reinforcing historical injustices rather than addressing them through participatory governance. When women—especially those from marginalized groups—are denied voice and benefits, community forestry risks reproducing the very power imbalances it was designed to dismantle.

From a governance perspective, exclusion weakens the effectiveness of forest management. Women possess extensive ecological knowledge derived from daily interaction with forests, including insights into species regeneration, fuelwood availability, water sources, and seasonal changes. Ignoring this knowledge leads to management decisions that may be ecologically inefficient or socially inappropriate.

Economically, exclusion represents a significant loss. Women's entrepreneurial potential in NTFPs, agroforestry, ecotourism, and value-added processing remains underutilized, limiting livelihood diversification and local economic resilience. Benefits continue to concentrate among a small group of elites, undermining poverty reduction goals.

Institutionally, CFUG's legitimacy suffers. When governance structures fail to represent the broader community, trust erodes, particularly in Nepal's federal context, where accountability and inclusiveness are increasingly demanded. Over time, exclusion threatens the sustainability of both forests and institutions, weakening collective action, compliance, and long-term conservation outcomes.

#### 4) Importance of This Paper

This paper is critically important because it advances the discourse on gender and community forestry beyond formal compliance toward substantive inclusion. Rather than focusing solely on policy provisions or quota fulfillment, it interrogates how participation unfolds in practice, revealing the disjuncture between progressive legislation and everyday institutional realities. By grounding analysis in lived experiences, the study bridges the gap between policy intent and implementation outcomes.

A key contribution lies in its intersectional approach. By examining how gender interacts with caste, class, marital status, and geography, the paper challenges homogenized representations of "women" and exposes differentiated vulnerabilities and power relations within CFUGs. This nuanced perspective addresses a major gap in forestry and natural resource governance literature.

The paper also offers practical value by proposing actionable frameworks, including criteria and indicators for assessing women's meaningful inclusion—such as decision-making power, access to benefits, leadership influence, and transparency of information. These tools can guide practitioners, policymakers, and donors in monitoring progress and designing targeted interventions.

This study has strong policy relevance. It calls for institutional restructuring, gender-responsive budgeting, intersectional quotas, and accountability mechanisms, aligning community forestry with broader commitments to social justice, sustainability, and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly gender equality, poverty reduction, and ecosystem

resilience.

#### 5) How This Paper Bridges the Knowledge Gap

This paper bridges a critical knowledge gap in community forestry by moving beyond descriptive accounts of women's participation to interrogate the quality, depth, and outcomes of inclusion. Existing literature and policy evaluations often equate women's presence in Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) with empowerment, relying heavily on numerical indicators such as committee membership or quota compliance. This paper challenges that assumption by demonstrating that formal inclusion does not necessarily translate into substantive power, benefit-sharing, or institutional influence.

A key contribution lies in its intersectional analytical lens. While many studies treat women as a homogeneous category, this paper systematically examines how gender exclusion is compounded by caste, class, marital status, and geography. By foregrounding the experiences of Dalit women, Janajati women, single women, and women from poorer households, the study reveals patterns of elite capture that remain invisible in gender-aggregated analyses. This nuanced approach fills a significant empirical and conceptual gap in forestry governance research.

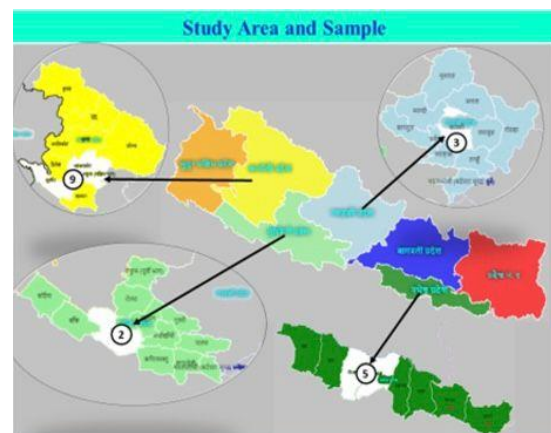
The paper also advances methodological understanding by integrating institutional analysis with lived experience. It links CFUG rules, benefit-sharing mechanisms, and decision-making structures with everyday practices of exclusion, such as informational withholding, time poverty, and symbolic leadership roles. In doing so, it connects policy frameworks with micro-level power relations.

Importantly, the paper contributes action-oriented knowledge. It proposes measurable criteria and indicators for assessing meaningful inclusion—decision-making authority, access to economic benefits, transparency, and leadership influence—providing policymakers and practitioners with tools to assess meaningful inclusion. By reframing women not as beneficiaries but as agents of governance, the paper strengthens theoretical, empirical, and policy debates on equitable and sustainable community forestry in Nepal.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### 1) Study area and sample

FIGURE 1. STUDY AREA



This study was conducted in four provinces of Nepal: Madhesh, Gandaki, Karnali, and Lumbini (Figure 1). A total of **19 Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs)** were purposively selected for in-depth analysis, including both **women-only and mixed-gender CFUGs** across the Tarai/Madhesh, Inner Tarai, and hill–mountain regions. Selection criteria included demonstrated conservation performance, income generation, and inclusive governance practices. CFUGs were identified through consultation with Division and Sub-Forest Offices and review of baseline records. The inclusion of diverse governance models enabled a comparative analysis of gender inclusion, decision-making processes, and CFUG performance across ecological and institutional contexts.

## 2) Data Collection

This study employed a qualitative, participatory approach, drawing on multiple data sources and methods to ensure depth and triangulation. Data were collected through province-level consultation workshops, focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs), field observations, and document review.

One-day consultation workshops were organized in four provinces, Lumbini, Karnali, Gandaki, and Madhesh, with participants from provincial ministries, forest sector institutions, local governments, FECOFUN, and other relevant stakeholders. These workshops focused on women's access to and inclusion in forest resources, facilitating and hindering factors, and suggestions for improving criteria and indicators. Consultations began at the inception stage with central-level experts and continued throughout the study through interactions with forestry, GESI, and research experts to refine objectives and validate findings.

FGDs were conducted in 19 Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs), including mixed and women-only groups, selected with support from Divisional Forest Offices, FECOFUN, and workshop participants. Open and unstructured discussions explored community experiences, challenges, differential impacts, and perceptions of proposed changes. KIIs with selected CFUG representatives, FECOFUN members, and sector experts were carried out using semi-structured guides to capture analytical perspectives. Field observations before, during, and after FGDs and KIIs provided contextual understanding of local realities and interactions.

In addition, relevant documents, including CFUG constitutions, operational plans, meeting minutes, annual and monitoring reports from the past five years, and official records from forest offices and directorates, were reviewed. Policy documents, peer-reviewed literature, and reports from government agencies, research institutions, NGOs/INGOs, and academia were examined to contextualize findings related to community forestry, gender equality, and social inclusion.

## IV. RESULTS

The central finding of this research is the persistent and multi-layered gender inequity within Nepal's community

forestry system. Despite performing the majority of day-to-day forest-related labor, women remain largely excluded from meaningful decision-making authority and equitable economic benefits. This disparity is not uniform but is critically shaped by intersectional identities; Dalit women, single women, and those from marginalized castes and economic backgrounds face compounded barriers, even within women-led institutions, where elite-caste women often dominate leadership. The study concludes that this systemic exclusion, driven by entrenched socio-cultural norms and institutional practices, not only perpetuates social injustice but also fundamentally weakens the governance effectiveness and long-term sustainability of the community forestry model itself.

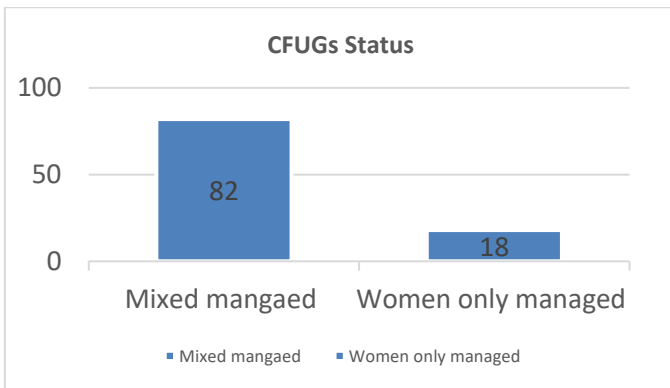
TABLE 1: PRESENT STATUS OF CFUGS

S.N.	District	No. of CFUGs	Mixed Managed	Women only managed
Gandaki Province				
1	Nawalpur	207	202	5
2	Kaski	510	504	6
3	Gorkha	510	449	61
4	Tanahau	621	613	8
5	Parbat	387	382	5
6	Manang	4	4	-
7	Myagdi	315	299	16
8	Lamjung	341	340	1
9	Baglung	527	507	20
10	Syangja	530	-	-
Lumbini Province				
1	Dang	458	439	19
2	Kapilvastu	123	121	2
3	Rupandehi	108	104	4
4	Arghakhanchi	444	403	41
5	Gulmi	458	427	31
6	Parasi	57	53	4
7	Palpa	708	676	32
8	Purba Rukum	148	145	3
9	Pyuthan	449	431	18
10	Bardiya	281	231	50
11	Banke	119	111	8
12	Rolpa	603	565	38
Karnali Province				
1	Kalikot	213	209	4
2	Jajarkot	306	301	5
3	Jumla	204	204	-
4	Dolpa	52	52	-
5	Dailekh	397	394	3
6	Mugu	89	89	-
7	Rukum Paschim			
8	Salyan	608	608	-
9	Surkhet	269	259	10
	Surkhet Bheri	173	157	16

S.N.	District	No. of CFUGs	Mixed Managed	Women only managed
10	Humla	92	92	-
Madhesh Province				
1	Saptari	134	127	7
2	Siraha	110	108	2
3	Dhanusha	41	39	2
4	Mahottari	75	65	10
5	Sarlahi	84	80	4
6	Rautahat	43	40	3
7	Bara	41	39	2
8	Parsa	4	4	

The table presents an overview of CFUGs in four provinces: Gandaki, Lumbini, Karnali, and Madhesh. The CFUGs are divided into two categories: mixed-managed and women-only managed groups. The pie chart in Figure 2 illustrates the distribution, showing that 82% of CFUGs fall into the mixed-managed category, while the remaining 18% are women-only managed groups across all four provinces.

FIGURE 2: PRESENT STATUS OF CFUGS OF ALL FOUR PROVINCES

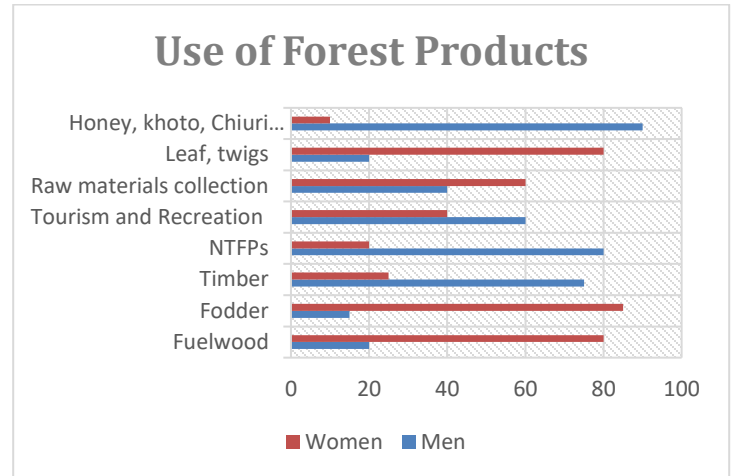


### 3) Use of Forest Products by Men and Women

The bar chart labeled Figure 3 depicts the current utilization of forest products by men and women. Upon analyzing the chart, it is evident that men primarily engage in activities that

yield monetary benefits. These activities include khoto collection, honey collection, timber harvesting, engaging in recreation and tourism businesses, and the collection and sale of non-timber forest products (NTFPs). On the other hand, women are more involved in non-productive (monetary) tasks in the forest, such as collecting fuelwood and fodder, gathering leaves and twigs, and sourcing raw materials for forest-based enterprises.

FIGURE 3: USE OF FOREST PRODUCTS BY MEN AND WOMEN



Similarly, Figure 4 presents the utilization of forest resources by different groups of women, taking into account their intersecting identities such as Dalit women, Janajati women, and Brahmin/Chhetri/Thakuri women, as well as single women and others. The figure highlights the varying levels of access these groups have to different forest resources. Dalit women have greater access to fuelwood but limited access to timber. Janajati women, on the other hand, enjoy greater access to non-timber forest products (NTFPs), honey, khoto (a type of herb), and chiuri collection, while Brahmin/Chhetri/Thakuri women have higher access to timber, tourism-related activities, and khoto, but are less involved in the collection of leaf twigs and raw materials. Single women and women in other categories tend to have greater access to raw materials and leaf twig collection, but relatively lower involvement in monetary activities.

FIGURE 4: FOREST RESOURCE USE BY WOMEN'S INTERSECTIONALITY

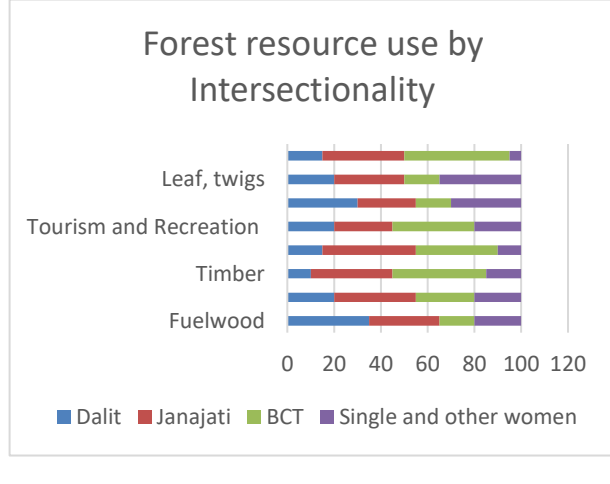
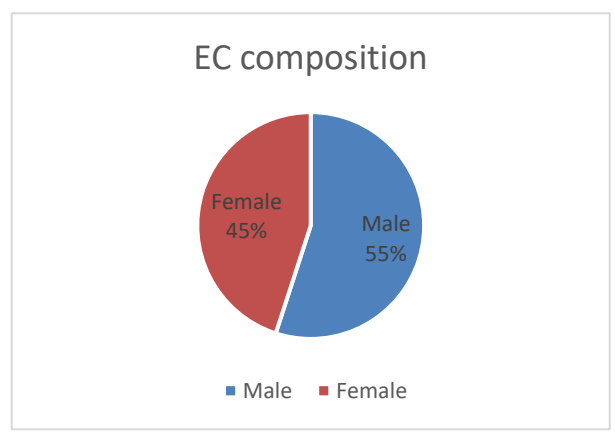
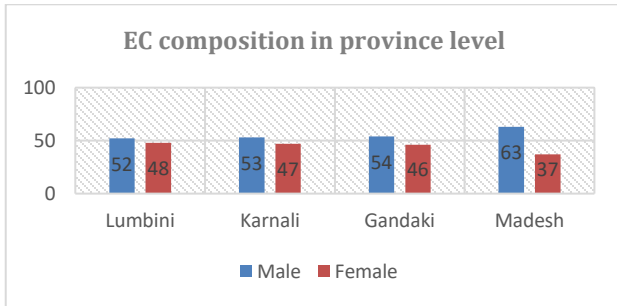


FIGURE 5: EC COMPOSITION ACCORDING TO PROVINCES MEN AND WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN CFUGS



The bar chart (Figure 5) illustrates the composition of provincial Executive Committees (ECs), with a focus on women's representation. The data reveal that women's representation in ECs remains relatively low across all provinces. Notably, Madhesh province has the lowest representation of women among the provinces. This can be attributed to socio-cultural norms, a male-dominant society, and language and cultural barriers faced by women in that region. On the other hand, in the Karnali province, men are often away from the villages for income-generating and seasonal work, resulting in a higher proportion of women in ECs than in other provinces.

FIGURE 6: OVERALL EC COMPOSITION IN FOUR PROVINCES



When we consider the overall representation of both men and women in ECs, the accompanying pie chart (Figure 6) shows that men hold a majority, with 55% of the seats. In comparison, women comprise 45% of the ECs across all provinces combined. These figures shed light on the current gender composition within ECs and highlight the need for increased efforts to promote and enhance women's representation and participation at the decision-making level.

4) Women in vital positions/women (intersectionality on vital position)

Figure 7 presents a bar chart that offers insights into the representation of women in key positions within the Executive Committees (ECs) of mixed-managed Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs), based on our visits to 19 CFUGs. It is important to note that this data reflects variations in women's representation across different CFUGs and does not represent the entire province. The data reveals that in mixed managed CFUGs, women hold a higher percentage of positions such as "Vice-President" and "Member" compared to other positions. This is because these positions are often perceived as inactive and ceremonial, primarily focusing on benefit sharing and decision-making. On the contrary, the "Secretary" position shows a lower percentage of women. This position is considered the most active, and men often prefer it. Interestingly, in some productive mixed-managed CFUGs where women hold the position of "Secretary," a male "office secretary" controls all important documentation and account information for the CFUG. This prevents women from accessing crucial information. The representation of women in the positions of "President" and "Treasurer" appears to be relatively similar, which could be due to provisions outlined in CFUG guidelines. Upon analyzing Figure 8, it becomes evident that women belonging to different intersectional backgrounds experience varying levels of representation in crucial positions

within both women-managed and mixed-managed Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs), based on our visits to all 19 CFUGs. The distribution of key positions such as President, Treasurer, and Secretary highlights the significant presence of Brahmin/Chhetri/Thakuri (BCT) women. These women, who are perceived as elite, belonging to higher social classes, educated, and influential, prominently occupy these key positions, showcasing their leadership and influence within the CFUGs. Conversely, Dalit women, single women, and women from other backgrounds have lower representation in vital positions and are primarily found as members only. This is primarily due to the perception that these groups belong to lower social classes, face economic challenges, lack influence and support, and are part of disadvantaged communities in the visited areas. However, Janajati women are well represented as members and Vice Presidents within the CFUGs. This can be attributed to the socio-cultural norms within Janajati communities, where women exercise significant decision-making power and mobilize resources within their households and communities. These patterns suggest that socio-economic conditions, caste, class, geography, and education significantly influence women's access to and participation in crucial positions within CFUGs. The varying levels of representation across different intersectional groups underscore the importance of implementing inclusive strategies that address barriers and create equal opportunities for all women to actively engage in decision-making processes and leadership roles within community forestry.

FIGURE 7: WOMEN IN VITAL POSITIONS IN MIXED-MANAGED GROUPS

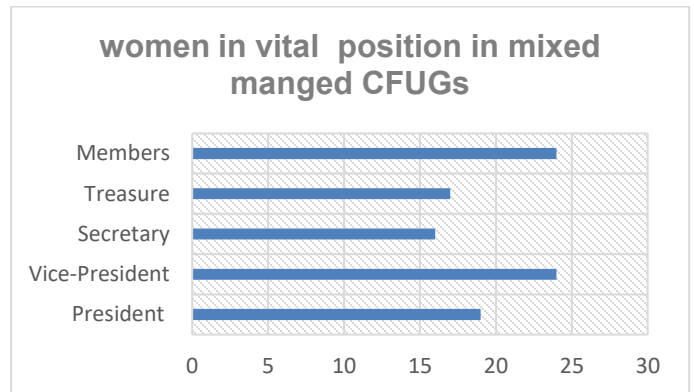
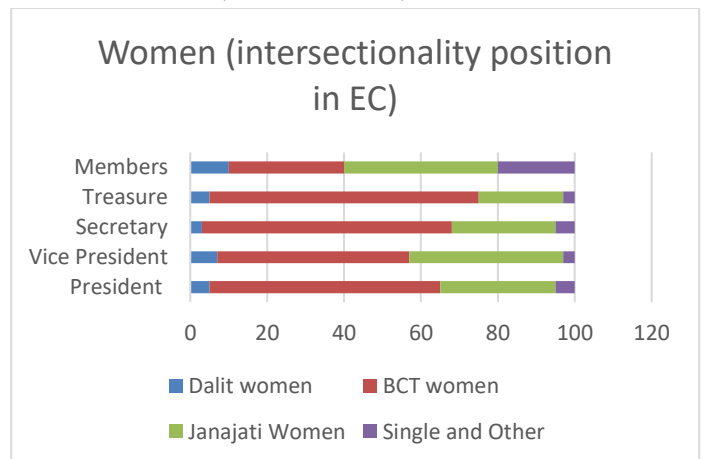


FIGURE 8: WOMEN (INTERSECTIONALITY) IN A VITAL POSITION IN EC

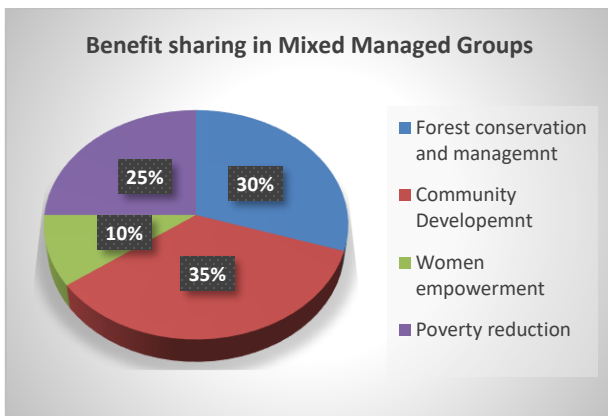


5) Difference in Mixed Managed and Women-Only Managed CFUGs

- Benefit sharing and control over resources,

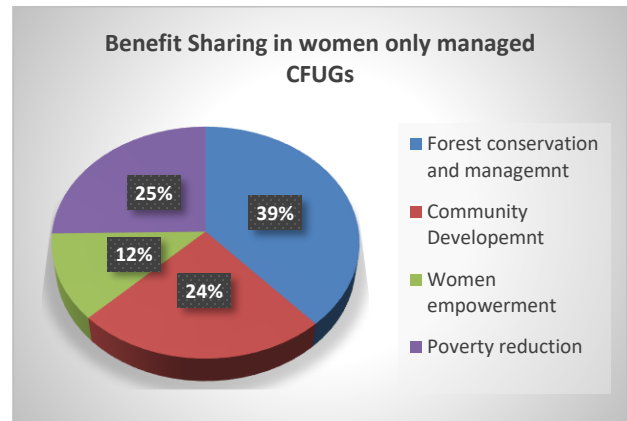
The Pie chart in Figure 10 provides an overview of expenditure distribution among the 19 mixed-managed Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) across different provinces. A significant portion of the CFUGs' income is allocated to community development initiatives, including the construction of recreational parks, roads, view towers, and other similar projects. However, there seems to be relatively lower expenditure on women's empowerment activities, such as skill development training, capacity-building workshops, exposure programs, and leadership training, across all mixed-managed CFUGs. In the mixed-managed CFUGs we visited in the Karnali province, the highest expenses are directed to forest conservation and community development. This includes investments in fencing wire and wildfire control measures to protect and preserve the forest resources. CFUGs in these areas also prioritize poverty reduction programs, specifically through the implementation of revolving funds and initiatives like vegetable farming, which aim to benefit poor and pro-poor households within their communities.

FIGURE 9: BENEFIT-SHARING PRACTICE IN MIXED-MANAGED GROUPS



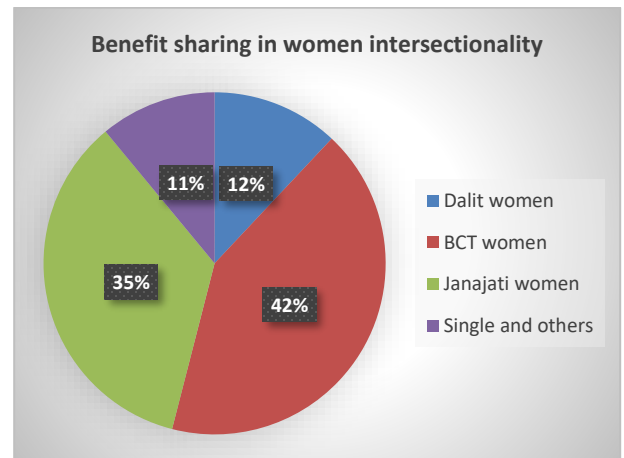
Referring to Figure 10, the bar chart provides an overview of the benefit-sharing mechanism in women-only-managed Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) across the 19 CFUGs we visited. Upon observation, it is evident that the highest percentage of funds is allocated to forest conservation and management activities within these CFUGs. This includes expenses for hiring forest guards, fencing, planting, constructing fire lines, and activities aimed at minimizing human-wildlife conflicts. Conversely, the data reveal that the lowest percentage of the budget is allocated to women's empowerment initiatives in these CFUGs. This can be attributed to two main reasons. Firstly, there is a lack of knowledge among women regarding the policy and guideline provisions for budget expenses. This results in limited allocation towards women's empowerment activities. Secondly, women are often assigned small patches of nonproductive forests, barren land, or plantation forests that require significant conservation and management efforts. As a result, these areas generate minimal income for the CFUGs and, subsequently, fewer resources are available for women's empowerment initiatives.

FIGURE 10: BENEFIT-SHARING MECHANISM IN WOMEN IN ONLY MANAGED GROUPS



When analyzing the benefit-sharing mechanism through the lens of women's intersectionality, we refer to Figure 10, which provides an overview of field scenarios across all 19 CFUGs. In terms of receiving benefits from CFUGs, BCT women stand out as the primary beneficiaries, particularly in accessing revolving funds and engaging in poverty-reduction activities such as goat farming, poultry rearing, tailoring, and beauty parlors. On the other hand, Dalit women face comparatively more challenges in accessing benefits and resources from CFUGs. They often find themselves lagging in terms of receiving support and opportunities. However, in CFUGs, we have visited in Gandaki province, Janajati women take the lead in benefit sharing, with Dalit women following closely behind. Meanwhile, single and other women face greater difficulties in comparison to BCT and Janajati women, as their access to resources and benefits from CFUGs is relatively limited (Figure 11). These observations highlight the importance of addressing intersectionality within CFUGs and ensuring that all women, regardless of their caste, ethnicity, or marital status, have equal opportunities to access and benefit from CFUG resources and support. By promoting inclusivity and providing targeted assistance, CFUGs can foster greater empowerment and socioeconomic development among women from diverse backgrounds.

FIGURE 11: BENEFIT-SHARING MECHANISM IN WOMEN'S INTERSECTIONALITY



In several CFUGs, the absence of a well-being ranking system for user households has led to the implementation of a quota-based benefit-sharing approach. Unfortunately, this

practice often overlooks the inclusion of women from diverse groups and castes, preventing them from participating in the distribution of benefits. Consequently, productive CFUGs frequently encounter conflicts and exhibit biases within their benefit-sharing mechanisms. Furthermore, there is a tendency to assign women small patches of nonproductive forest areas, while men predominantly engage in CFUGs that prioritize scientific forest management.

#### V. IMPLICATIONS: DEVELOPING CRITERIA AND INDICATORS OF WOMEN'S ACCESS TO COMMUNITY FORESTRY GOODS AND SERVICES.

We conducted extensive qualitative research and collaborated with experts in the field. We sought input from sector experts, external specialists, government officials from provincial ministries, and division and sub-division forest offices in the respective provinces. Key informant interviews (KIIs) were also conducted with relevant stakeholders. However, it is important to note that the availability of secondary data for quantitative analysis to support the development of these criteria and indicators was limited. This limitation stemmed from inadequate documentation of information and data by the division and sub-division forest offices, as well as the CFUGs themselves.

##### 1) Criteria:

- Participation refers to women's active involvement in CFUG processes, measured by attendance at assemblies and meetings, participation in planning and management activities, and engagement in CFUG-related livelihood initiatives.
- Leadership captures women's representation in formal decision-making positions, assessed by their presence in executive committees and key leadership roles, indicating their ability to influence institutional decisions and benefit distribution.
- Power and Control assesses women's influence over decisions and resources, including access to forest products, control over income, access to credit and training, and autonomy in resource use relative to men.
- Knowledge and experience measure women's access to information and capacity-building opportunities and the extent to which their knowledge and lived experiences are incorporated into CFUG decision-making and implementation.
- Time Management examines whether institutional arrangements enable women's participation without disproportionate time burdens, assessed through meeting schedules, procedural efficiency, and mechanisms that reduce time constraints.

##### 2) Indicators:

- Women's Participation in the Executive Committee (EC) refers to the proportion of women holding EC positions and their active involvement in committee meetings and institutional decision-making.
- Participation in Monitoring and Evaluation captures

women's involvement in assessing CFUG activities, including monitoring implementation, evaluating outcomes, and identifying gaps and improvements.

- Participation in Fund and Resource Mobilization measures women's engagement in income-generating activities, revolving funds, non-timber forest product (NTFP) collection and trade, and CFUG-supported livelihood initiatives.
- Participation in Resource Allocation and Benefit Sharing assesses women's involvement in decisions related to the allocation of financial, material, and forest-based benefits within CFUGs.
- Participation in Community Development Activities refers to women's engagement in CFUG-led community development initiatives contributing to social and economic well-being.
- Proportional Representation in Leadership measures the share of women in formal leadership roles, including chairperson, secretary, treasurer, and executive committee positions.
- Gender-Responsive Budget Allocation examines whether CFUG planning and budgeting processes allocate resources in accordance with gender guidelines and women's priorities.
- Role in Forest Conservation and Management captures women's participation in forest management activities, including plantation, monitoring, conservation, sustainable harvesting, and access to forest resources such as NTFPs.
- Coordination and Collaboration with Stakeholders assesses women's participation in multi-stakeholder platforms, committees, and networks involving local government, NGOs, and other institutions.
- Decision-Making Influence measures the extent to which women's perspectives are considered and integrated into CFUG decisions related to governance, resource use, and benefit distribution.
- Social Inclusion captures the participation and access of women across caste, ethnicity, class, household composition, and marginalized social groups.
- Political Influence assesses women's representation and influence within CFUG governance structures and their ability to advocate for policies and resources.
- Control over Assets and Resources measures women's control over financial assets, income, forest resources, and ownership or management of income-generating activities.
- Legal Awareness captures women's knowledge of laws, policies, rights, and gender-responsive forestry guidelines relevant to CFUG governance.
- Good Governance Practice assesses transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness in CFUG operations, including women's access to information and leadership opportunities.
- Institutional Capacity measures CFUGs' structural and managerial capacity to support women's participation, representation, and access to goods and services.
- Education Status captures women's literacy and

educational attainment relevant to accessing information, participating in governance, and exercising rights.

- Training and Capacity Building assesses women’s access to skill development, technical training, and leadership-building opportunities.
- Family and Community Support measures the extent of household and community encouragement enabling women’s participation in CFUG activities.
- Workload Distribution assesses the balance of domestic, caregiving, and productive responsibilities affecting women’s ability to engage in CFUGs.
- Flexible Meeting Arrangements examines whether CFUG meeting schedules and procedures accommodate women’s time constraints.
- Geographical Representation measures the inclusion of women from different villages, remote areas, and geographically marginalized locations within CFUG governance and activities (Table 2).

TABLE 2: TABLE OF CRITERIA AND INDICATORS

Criteria	Indicators				
Participation	Women's participation in EC	Fund and resource mobilization, such as income-generating activities, revolving fund	Resource allocation and Benefit sharing	Community development activities	Monitoring and evaluation
Leadership	Women participation in leadership position	Budget allocation according to the guidelines	women's role in forest conservation activities	Coordination and collaboration with stakeholders	Decision-making influence
Power and Control	Social Inclusion (Caste /ethnicity /Class/Representation and household composition)	Political Influence	Control over assets and resources		
Knowledge and experiences	Informed and aware of the law and policies	Good governance	Institutional capacity	Education status	Access to information and resources
Time Management	Family and Community Support	Workload	Flexible meeting schedule	Geographical representation	

## VI. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a persistent pattern of passivity and weak community engagement within Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs), shaped by entrenched gender, caste, and ethnic discrimination. These structural inequalities restrict women’s access to forest resources, limit their participation in decision-making, and undermine equitable benefit sharing. Such dynamics are reinforced by sociocultural norms, male-dominated power relations, and entrenched behavioral practices, echoing concerns raised by Colfer and Minarchek (2012).

Women with intersecting identities—including Dalit women, disadvantaged women, and single women—experience heightened exclusion and multiple layers of discrimination. This aligns with earlier studies (Agarwal, 2001; Adhikari et al., 2004; Khadka & Verma, 2012; Sapkota, 2016), which emphasize how overlapping social identities intensify marginalization within community forestry institutions. Field narratives underscore that meaningful representation in CFUG executive committees is essential for inclusive and effective decision-making. However, women from marginalized groups remain largely excluded from leadership roles and decision-making forums despite their active involvement in forest conservation activities.

The study further confirms strong male dominance in Executive Committees and control over financial transactions related to forest resources, consistent with Wagle et al. (2017). Gendered divisions of labor continue to confine women to unpaid and informal roles, resulting in limited recognition of their contributions despite their central role in forest management (Khadka & Verma, 2012). Elite-driven knowledge systems and power structures further marginalize women, Dalits, and ethnic minorities from benefit sharing and governance processes (Sapkota, 2016; Resurrección et al., 2012).

Women emphasized the need for safe, inclusive spaces that respect their voices and knowledge systems. Equal access to financial resources, credit facilities, and benefit-sharing mechanisms emerged as a critical concern, particularly for women from disadvantaged backgrounds. Targeted capacity-building initiatives—focusing on leadership development, technical forestry skills, and entrepreneurial training were identified as essential to enhance women’s agency and leadership within CFUGs.

Consistent with Agarwal (2010), the study highlights that increased women’s participation contributes to sustainable forest management, improved livelihoods, and community development, particularly for poor and marginalized households. Strengthening awareness of intersectionality, gender equality, and women’s rights, alongside fostering collaboration and networking among women from intersecting identities, can act as a catalyst for institutional transformation. Such collective spaces enable knowledge exchange, solidarity, and empowerment, reinforcing women’s participation as a prerequisite for equitable and sustainable community forestry governance.

## VII. CONCLUSION

This study examined women's access to and inclusion in the goods and services provided by Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) across multiple provinces, covering both mixed-managed and women-only CFUGs. The findings are consistent with earlier gender-focused studies in community forestry, while also revealing new institutional challenges emerging under Nepal's federal governance system. Shifting power relations at the local level, rapid urbanization, and declining dependence on forest resources have reduced the relevance of CFUGs for many communities, widening the gap between forests and users. In this context, CFUGs require institutional restructuring that moves beyond a conservation-centric mandate toward productive, income-generating, and livelihood-oriented management.

Despite policy provisions promoting women's representation in Executive Committees (ECs), meaningful participation remains limited. Existing policies inadequately address intersectionality and fail to account for the compounded barriers faced by women from marginalized groups, including Dalits, Janajati, widows, landless and poor households, and persons with disabilities. These structural exclusions restrict access to benefits, decision-making authority, and leadership roles, undermining both equity and governance outcomes. In addition, weak financial incentives for conservation and widespread non-compliance with approved management plans by both CFUGs and government agencies further erode institutional legitimacy and reduce benefits derived from community forestry.

The study also highlights institutional weakening of CFUGs under federalization, characterized by reduced authority at the village level, declining donor engagement, and limited coordination with local governments. Addressing these challenges requires policy reforms that strengthen CFUGs as inclusive governance institutions. Key measures include institutionalizing intersectional quotas, ensuring diverse representation in decision-making bodies, systematically monitoring women's participation, and establishing transparent and inclusive benefit-sharing mechanisms. Strengthening coordination between CFUGs and local governments, clarifying roles and responsibilities, and investing in leadership development, training, and community-level support are essential for revitalizing community forestry. Such reforms are critical for enhancing equity, institutional effectiveness, and the long-term sustainability of Nepal's community forest governance system.

## VIII. WAY FORWARD: STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S INCLUSION IN COMMUNITY FORESTRY

To transform Nepal's community forestry from a policy ideal into an inclusive and equitable reality, a multi-dimensional and systemic approach is essential. The following strategies, rooted in the study's findings, are proposed:

- 1) Institutionalize Intersectional Representation and Leadership

Formal quotas for women in executive committees must be expanded to include intersectional quotas, ensuring representation of Dalit, Janajati, single, and marginalized women in key leadership positions (President, Secretary, Treasurer). This must be coupled with mandatory gender and social inclusion (GESI) audits of CFUGs to monitor compliance and impact.

- 2) Implement Gender-Responsive and Transparent Governance

CFUGs should adopt gender-responsive budgeting, allocating specific funds for women's empowerment, skill development, and leadership training. Financial records and decision-making processes must be transparent and accessible, with digital or community-led reporting systems to ensure women have equal access to information.

- 3) Shift from Conservation-Centric to Livelihood-Oriented Management

To enhance relevance and benefits, CFUGs should transition towards productive and income-generating forestry. This includes promoting women-led enterprises in non-timber forest products (NTFPs), ecotourism, and sustainable agroforestry. Women should be granted access to larger, productive forest patches and integrated into value chains.

- 4) Strengthen Capacity Building and Knowledge Systems

Targeted capacity-building programs should be designed for women, focusing on technical forestry, financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and leadership. Programs must be accessible and tailored to women with intersecting identities, leveraging local knowledge and peer-to-peer learning networks.

- 5) Enhance Coordination and Institutional Support

Stronger collaboration between CFUGs, local governments, and NGOs is critical. Local governments should provide technical and financial support, while national policies must clarify roles and ensure CFUGs retain meaningful authority under federalism. Donor and NGO engagement should be revitalized to fund gender-transformative initiatives.

- 6) Create Enabling Social and Temporal Conditions

CFUGs should adopt flexible meeting times, locations, and formats (e.g., childcare support) to accommodate women's time burdens. Awareness campaigns targeting men and community elders are needed to shift socio-cultural norms and encourage household support for women's participation.

- 7) Develop and Use Gender-Inclusive Monitoring Frameworks

The criteria and indicators proposed in the study should be operationalized into a standardized monitoring tool. Regular participatory assessments can track progress in women's participation, benefit-sharing, and leadership, ensuring accountability and continuous improvement.

By implementing these strategies, community forestry in Nepal can evolve into a truly inclusive institution—one that not only conserves forests but also empowers women, reduces poverty, and builds resilient, equitable communities.

## IX. FINAL THOUGHTS: BRIDGING POLICY, PRACTICE, AND POWER IN NEPAL'S COMMUNITY FORESTRY

This paper reveals a stark disconnect between Nepal's progressive community forestry policies and the lived realities of women on the ground. Despite their foundational labor and knowledge, women remain structurally excluded from decision-making and economic benefits, a gap widened by intersecting identities of caste, class, and marital status. The conceptual framework highlighted how structural exclusion—rooted in socio-cultural norms and institutional inertia—manifests in limited leadership roles, unequal benefit sharing, and elite capture within CFUGs.

The findings directly link these problems to tangible consequences: undermined social justice, weakened governance effectiveness, and threatened forest sustainability. The discussion reinforces that token representation is insufficient; meaningful inclusion requires transforming power dynamics, not just increasing numbers. Women's participation remains passive where it exists, confined to ceremonial roles, while control over resources and information remains predominantly male.

Crucially, the paper moves beyond diagnosis to offer a transformative roadmap. By proposing actionable criteria and indicators, it provides a tool for measuring and catalyzing change. The way forward must center on intersectional quotas, gender-responsive governance, and livelihood-oriented forest management that values women's agency as essential to ecological and social resilience.

Ultimately, this research underscores that inclusive community forestry is not merely a gender equity issue but a prerequisite for sustainable development. Closing the gap between policy and practice requires deliberate institutional reform, continuous monitoring, and a committed shift in power—ensuring that Nepal's community forests truly serve, sustain, and empower all those who depend on them.

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