

GENDER, SOCIAL CAPITAL AND COLLECTIVE ACTION: A GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON COLLECTIVE SUSTAINABILITY OF WATER RESOURCE GOVERNANCE IN FAR WEST NEPAL

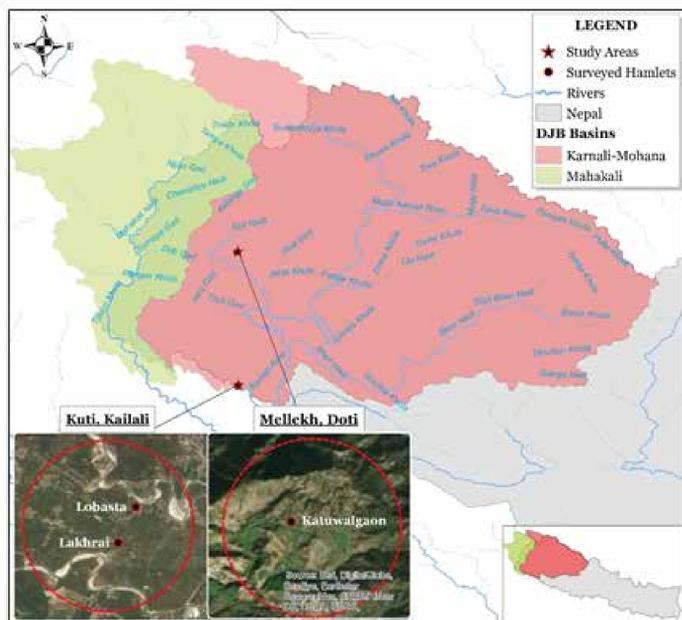
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CHALLENGE

In Nepal, as in other South Asian countries, water resource development is often considered to be a primarily technological challenge, requiring engineered solutions. Many years of advocacy for gender equality in water management - drawing attention to the need for local institutional solutions has shifted this outlook. Thus, today women's participation in water user associations (WUA) is encouraged and identified to be key in enabling gender equality, a more equal participation in water governance and a more equal share of water infrastructure and services. Nonetheless, these well intentioned efforts tend to overlook complex social dynamics in rural areas, which influence the effectiveness of women's participation. If initiatives are to succeed in promoting gender equality, they must be considered in the light of the wider social and political contexts - of what makes a community, a society.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Drawing on a capabilities approach by Sen (1990) and literature on social capital, this research investigates the linkages between social capital, capabilities and collective management of water resources in two villages in far western Nepal, one each in Doti and Kailali. Methods of data collection included well-being ranking, institutional venn diagrams, village mapping, in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and participant observation. The respondents were sampled purposively from different caste, class, gender, age, education and social positions. Altogether 30 respondents (10 males, 20 females) in Kailali and 24 respondents (12 males, 12 females) in Doti were interviewed. To ease the language constraint, especially with women who do not speak Nepali in Doti and Kailali, a local translator was hired at both research sites. Notes were taken in Nepali, which were later transcribed in English and coded under emergent research themes. Efforts were made to interview members and non-members of community groups uniformly in order to gather different perspective on social capital and collective action.



Tharu women in Lobasta hamlet, Kuti village, Kailali District, participating in a institutional venn diagram and group discussion.



INSIGHTS AND INNOVATIONS

The proposed solutions centre on rural people's capabilities and social capital, which depend in turn, on their access to information, knowledge and opportunities. While men obtain these through a variety of formal and informal interactions, women are limited to mostly informal activities, which they create and lead, with a primary focus on women's issues (e.g., health and nutrition). Men, in contrast, dominate discussions and management of key resources, like water, thus putting women at a disadvantage.

Furthermore, capabilities and social capital is also shaped by unequal class, caste and patrilineal or male-centric networks. Women's links with formal and informal networks depend on their relations with men in the family. Therefore, women from poor and marginalized households, with fewer kinship and social ties, have fewer opportunities for empowerment. Male migration further complicates the situation, making women dependent on men relatives for work that is socially defined as masculine (such as transporting and operating water pumps). These women's access to information remains restricted as well, since outmigration leaves male "gatekeepers" largely in control of major decisions in the village.

To make water management more just and effective, this research calls for investment in the social capital and capabilities of women and marginalized people generally, with particular emphasis on women's linkages and networks, so they can contribute more effectively to water governance.

NEXT STEPS

The study offers these recommendations:

- Create more opportunities for women to play technical and non-technical roles in organizations and projects; rural women will feel more comfortable to create social relations with female staff members, thereby extending their social network beyond their community.
- Introduce incentives for organizations and projects into account in their planning, implementation and monitoring how intra-household and intracommunity social relations shape access to water along gender, class, caste, and age lines and to conduct affirmative actions with the aim of diminishing the influence of these factors.
- Address intra-household gender relations through group methods [e.g., creating safe spaces to discuss on local gender and social norms Without this support, a young married woman with a migrant husband and young children will find it difficult to take part in decision-making, even if she is literate and entirely capable of contributing to local water governance.
- Design policies and activities that enhance collective action in rural communities, based on increased trust and social well-being.

Women farmers irrigating terraced rice fields, using piped water from an irrigation pond and mud channels in Katalgoan hamlet, Mellkeh village, Doti

