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Farmer Field Schools: Unexpected Outcomes of Gendered Empowerment in Wartime Nepal

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Abstract

This article is the outcome of an empirical study of technical training of women and men through Farmer Field Schools in rural Nepal during the last decade. When the Farmer Field Schools started in Nepal as part of the FAO Integrated Pest Management project in 1997, this was also the year that the Maoists declared the People's Revolution. The article describes the increased participation of women in FFS and its positive effect on food security of their families. After initial failure of FFS to include gender in its policy and activities, the article discusses the gradual acceptance of gender issues in the training. Empowerment is seen as a developmental process rather than as a product somebody or a group can gain access to or own. Different forms and objectives of empowerment of both women and men are discussed, and the unintended outcomes of FFS intervention in the context of rapid social-economic and political change during the Maoist revolution in Nepal.

Keywords: Farmer Field Schools, gender, empowerment, Maoist revolution

"If Bhagwan does not help us we have to do it ourselves"

(female farmer, Sindhupalchowk, interview 2009)

1. Introduction

The above quote is the remark of a female farmer in the mid hills of Nepal who was interviewed during the course of research that forms the basis of this article. She expressed disillusionment with the sources of support she previously counted on, like *Bhagwan*, God.

Her faith in religion, but also in the government - who was until recently considered a representative of the God or goddess in Nepal - has been shaken. Together with many other women in her village she took development in her own hands, she exercised her agency.

This woman was not an exception among the respondents in our empirical study. This article addresses the unintended outcomes of Farmer Field Schools' technical training on the social-economic development of women and men in rural Nepal during the last decade. It argues that this process of gendered empowerment took place as a result of an intervention called Farmer Field Schools (FFS) in a period of change during the Maoist revolution in Nepal. When the Farmer Field Schools started in Nepal as part of the FAO Integrated Pest Management project in 1997, this was also the year that the Maoists declared the People's Revolution. FFS began in a period that was characterized by conflict and rapid socio-political changes in society.

2. Methodology

Drawing on experiences of the first author through her active involvement in FFS at the start of the project in 1997, by collecting data during a mid-term project evaluation in 2002, and as part of a PhD research project in 2009 this article presents longitudinal data of the institutional, social-cultural and political changes that have taken place during more than a decade. Qualitative information was collected through Focus Group Discussions and in-depth individual semi-structured interviews with male (n=57) and female farmers (n=94), project staff and government officials (n=24) and NGO staff (n=19).

First, Farmer Field School intervention in Nepal is briefly introduced, followed by a description of the Maoist movement and gender issues in Nepal. We subsequently look at the effect of their participation in FFS on the empowerment of both female and male farmers in the changing social-economic and political context of the Maoist revolution.

Empowerment and agency are often debated concepts in the academic world but in development practice they seem to be used without discussion, assuming that it is always a 'good' thing having a positive impact on farmers. We here apply the concept of empowerment that "refers to the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied them" (Kabeer 1999: 436). Empowerment is the interaction between access and control over resources, exercising agency, expanding the room for maneuver in an institutional setting, leading to transformation of power relations, addressing all dimensions of power. These elements are linked, not in a linear way but in a cyclical movement, a continuous process, whereby the outcome influences the resources and so on. Neither should their use be restricted to women's development. In and by itself, empowerment is not confined to women in development, although feminist literature sometimes gives this impression.

Agency is another key concept because it concerns the individual, the subject of empowerment. Agency can be understood as a person's ability to make choices and to transform those choices into desired outcomes (World Development Report 2012). In many occasions a change in achievements brings about a further change in the means or resources

of empowerment. How we precisely define empowerment within our projects will depend upon the specific individuals and contexts involved (Bailey, 1992). We are all influenced by the social contexts (structures, institutions, rules, norms) in which we find ourselves, but we are not simply determined by these contexts, we also help shaping them. The institutional context shapes the opportunities people have. Agency is therefore context dependent. A woman can travel by bus to go to the city, but in Nepalese society she is expected to travel in the company of a male family member, or stay at home. It is not the woman's agency but the context that constrains her if she wants to go shopping.

In this article we examine how agency can be exercised in the context of the Maoist revolution or civil war. We describe what empowerment actually means in practice, from the perspectives and experiences of both men and women who have participated in FFS over the last decade in Nepal. Since farmers are not a homogenous group and women and men have different roles in agriculture in Nepal, they have different experiences of empowerment. Such a gendered study adds significantly to our understanding of empowerment through FFS. It will become evident that empowerment in practice is rather different from what development policy makers and FFS facilitators understand it to be. Empowerment is not a product that can be delivered through project intervention, but a process or an emerging property of the female and male farmers involved in FFS, with unforeseen directions and shapes as a result.

3. The Farmer Field School

The Farmer Field School (FFS) was first developed in 1989 in Indonesia as a response to problems associated with the failure of the Green Revolution and particularly with the misuse of pesticides. FFS follows a participatory approach to agricultural extension and research, and aims to bring about change in rural areas. In this approach a group of approximately 25 farmers meet season-long on a weekly basis, discuss field problems, undertake action research and are involved in discovery learning. FFS was introduced in Nepal as an FAO integrated pest management project in 1997 with concrete output oriented goals: the increase of agricultural production and the reduction of pesticide use. Changing donor paradigms as well as a growing insight that farmers' realities and needs were different and more complex than initially assumed during the planning of the project, made FFS more outcome and process oriented, focusing on empowerment and capacity-building of farmers.

Farmers were the main focus of attention in the FFS project in Nepal. However, it has long been established that farmers are not a homogenous group (Pradhan, 2002; Guijt and Shah, 1998; Anderson, 1983) and include many sub-groups of interest and identities. These can be based on age, gender, education, language, income, health status, etc. For the purpose of analysis in the Nepalese context it is increasingly acknowledged that variables such as gender, caste and ethnic identity influence poverty and vulnerability outcomes (Bennett, 2006). The interrelation is not easy to analyze, let alone address. For a long time these issues have been ignored but today even the government of Nepal writes openly about caste, ethnicity and gender as co-determinants of poverty in its Poverty Reduction Strategic Plan (PRSP), the Twelfth Plan (2012 – 2017). However, data on gender, caste and ethnic dimensions of poverty is still very incomplete and dealing with these issue is still a sensitive matter (Lecomte-Tilouine,

2009; Bennett, 2002). The FFS program is not an exception. As Lynn Bennett stated in her World Bank report: Policy makers and trainers prefer more neutral terms such as “poor farmers”, “vulnerable groups” or “disadvantaged communities”, thereby avoiding the issue altogether (Bennett, 2002:1).

In 1996 social exclusion was not considered an issue in FFS, most beneficiaries belonged to the upper caste, only in some villages Janajatis were in the majority. With regards to gender it was considered normal practice that in the initial FFS project the key players were men. Under influence of the Women in Development Paradigm the donor requested specific attention for gender in the project, as exemplified by Nepal’s National IPM Program’s Country Report (2001:8):

> “The National IPM Programme in Nepal is committed to provide women and men equal access to their training. The Programme wants to implement its activities on a gender equal basis. That this is not easy and straightforward is the experience during the implementation of the programme. “Despite the fact that most IPM trainers are male and given little training on gender issues, the participation of women has increased in the farmer field school. Gender remains an area however, that needs attention in the near future”.

The Report did not elaborate on which action to take and gave no definition or clarification of what was meant by gender equality in the project documents. In FFS addressing gender issues did not go beyond the objective of having men and women participate on an equal basis. This means, once women would have gained access. The structural inequity of gaining access was not addressed in practice, nor the issue of women belonging to different castes/ethnic groups.

In practice, FFS had no gender perspective in its policy and activities. A large number of female participants were considered a success in terms of gender. As stated by an FAO officer in Bangkok: “We do not need a gender approach, women just come to our FFS without specifically targeting them” (interview 2006). That it is not easy to improve access to FFS for women was the experience of Laila Jasmin Banu and Brigitte Bode. In a critical review of the FFS approach by CARE in Bangladesh, they stated that problems in working with women are largely due to the highly gendered division of labor and the limited mobility that women from landholding households enjoy. Just as in other countries of South Asia, women perform the vast majority of reproductive tasks and have little time left to take part in training sessions. As many studies of South Asian gender dynamics have shown, the greater the economic marginalization of the household, the greater the likelihood that women are engaged in productive activities (selling of labor for wages in cash or kind). Thus women from poor households have little time and opportunity to participate in FFS sessions (Banu and Bode, 2002, in Bartlett, 2004: 68).

In Nepal, female participation in Farmer Field Schools varied from 100% in some areas (e.g. Bhaktapur district) to 0% in some lowland (*terai*) communities. Among the IPM trainers only 7% is female (National IPM Programme Country Report, 2002). In the IPM Mid-Term Review Report (2006:8) gender issues were marginalized with the following statement:

"Field visits and programme documents suggest that neither social – nor gender discrimination is a problem at grassroots level".

4. The Maoist insurgency

The Maoist insurgency or People's War, as the Maoists prefer to call their fight, began in 1996, six years after the restoration of multiparty democracy.[1] One key aim of their fight or revolution was to establish "The People's Republic of Nepal." This they have achieved, but still their struggle is continuing (Maoist Outlook, 2012).

The Maoist insurgency in Nepal[2] has been viewed from different perspectives: as a consequence of failed development, as an ethnic uprising, and as a result of bad governance (Hachhethu, 2004). Frequent government changes and inside party conflicts have shaped the political scene since the 1990s. Power grabbing, internal quarrelling, corruption, nepotism, favoritism and political leaders who were more interested in personal gains than government stability have contributed to widespread dissatisfaction with politics in Nepal, which may largely explain the fast growing support for the Maoists' cause. (Khatri, 1992; Upreti, 2006; Hutt, 2004). Poverty, unemployment, regional disparities, dependency on foreign aid, unequal foreign trade relations, slow and unequal development have also been considered a reason for expansion of the support base for the Maoists (Khatri, 1992; Upreti, 2006). "Persistent economic deprivation" is regarded as the "key factor that explains why the mid and far western regions provided a fertile breeding ground for rebellion" (Deraniyagala, 2005:53). Mancours (2006) shows that access to land has a significant correlation with Maoist recruitment. In other words, "[R]elative deprivation of the (near) landless has contributed to salient support for – or at least lack of resistance against – the insurgency" (Mancours, 2006:17). Notwithstanding differences in argument, there seems to be a common understanding that Nepal's conflict can be adequately explained by relative inequality[3]. It is undeniably a combination of factors that have contributed to the uprising of the Maoist movement, while the failure of successive governments has added to its spread.

Men and women have experienced the Maoist movement differently. Men were often targeted to join the fight and were approached either by the government or the Maoist army. Many men fled the rural areas to escape the fighting and often found job opportunities abroad. Men in the Maoist movement were observed in their traditional roles: men in decision-making and women in caring or support positions. Most leaders are men, and the party's ultimate leaders Prachanda, Babu Ram Bhattarai are both from the upper caste[4], dominant ethnic Brahmin

[1] Most likely the unrest started much earlier. When I stayed on the campus of the Institute of Agriculture and Animal Science in 1986 there was already unrest among students and strong involvement in Maoist Party politics.

[2] For more studies on the Maoist movement a.o. Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009; Onesto, 2000; Khatri, 1992; Upreti, 2006; Lawoti, 2003; Deraniyagala, 2005; Manandhar, 2004; Mancours 2006; Sharma 2006; Hutt et al., 2004; Hatlebakk, 2008; Hachhethu, 2004.

[3] See studies by a.o. Lawoti, 2003; Deraniyagala, 2005; Manandhar, 2004; Mancours 2006; Sharma 2006; Hutt et al., 2004; Hatlebakk, 2008; Hachhethu, 2004.

[4] The concept of caste and ethnicity, the number of these groups, their origin, their traditions and languages are still under debate. In modern times ethnicity and cast have been merged in a societal hierarchy, therefore

group in society. Their male perspective on leadership is ambivalent, making them reluctant about redefining gender relations, claiming that all inequities boiled down to be the outcome of feudalism and class oppression (Yami, 2007).

In line with Maoist ideology the Maoist leaders tend to gloss over diversity, and they refer to Nepalese women as if they are a homogenous group (Tamang, 2009). This view is guided foremost by party interest, considering class oppression at the heart of all oppression. It positions the oppressed versus the oppressors.

Remarkably, and in contrast with their ambivalence, the website of the Maoists (www.cpnm.org) shows many pictures of women who joined their army. Often of Janajati[5] origin, the women are stern-looking with short hair and dressed in green fighting fatigues and sport shoes. These women look like an extreme make-over version of the traditional Nepali women with their customary colorful (often red) sari, slippers, jewelry, and long flowing dark hair. Women were involved in the Maoist movement especially as guerrilla fighters, but also as propagandists, mobilisers and to some extent as party cadres and district secretaries. According to different sources there are about 30 – 40% women in the Maoist force (Sharma and Prasain, 2004) although there are no hard data. These are mostly women from Janajati and Dalit groups (Yami, 2007), but also many district schoolgirls and semi-literate women joined the movement (Gautam, Banskota, & Manchanda, 2001), and even upper caste women. The Maoists have encouraged women, and particularly rural girls, to sign up. They showed some ambiguity towards participation of educated, urban women who were considered too bourgeois (Parvati in Yami, 2007; Parvati, 2003). Prachanda has frankly admitted to have been surprised by the overwhelming response of women (Onesto, 2000). The active involvement of women has been one of the most discussed aspects of the Maoist insurgency (Sharma and Prasain, 2004). Women support the Maoists for several reasons: they see it as a chance to break with the oppressive traditions of the Hindu family rules (Sharma and Prasain, 2004), while Yami (2007) suggests that women are motivated to join the Maoists because they believe that they will help them fight their oppression. “Women’s social oppression is firmly rooted in state sponsored Hindu religion which upholds feudal Brahminical rule based on caste system, which disparages women in relation to men” (Yami, 2007:15). Also, Parvati[6] links this suppression of women to the feudal system, as other Maoists do: The feudal patriarchy headed by the King not only denies women’s dignity but also robs away her labor by denying her right to parental property (ibid.: 108).

caste/ethnicity are often used interchangeably. In the Nepalese context, like the Indian, we can speak of a hierarchy of ethnic groups because ethnicity and caste are intertwined and developing together in modern Nepal (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009).

[5] Although there are contradictory definitions of what makes a group in Nepalese society a janajati, in this article we use the definition of the Taskforce for the Formation of the Foundation for the Uplift of Nationalities, of janajati as a community “having its own mother tongue and traditional culture but not belonging to the Hindu caste system” (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, www.nefin.org.np).

[6] Comrade Parvati is Central Committee Member and Head of Women’s Department of CPN (Maoist).

Parvati herself takes a more subtle approach by suggesting that the effects of the Maoist movement have been different for women from different groups, depending upon their existing relative freedoms. She writes that the revolution has assisted Hindu women "[T]o break the feudal patriarchal restrictive life imposed by the puritanical Hindu religion, by unleashing their repressed energy" (Parvati, 1999:2). She suggests that the people's war has had a particularly important impact on those from the most exploited Dalit communities by "unleashing their hatred against the state" (idem).

In most cases women joined for the same reasons as men from their own community, according to Kampwirth in Lohani-Chase (2008). However, it seems that the Maoist platform is clearly appealing to many rural women, both Hindu and other. It offers the women a chance to break free from oppression within their household or community, where they are often under strict control of their parents-in-law (Gartaula, 2011). Women's political awareness and motivations for getting involved in the guerrilla force was shaped by intersecting lines of poverty, status, class, caste, ethnicity, religion, gender, and history (Pettigrew and Shneiderman, 2004). It is the first movement in Nepal in which women and men openly have been observed to fight together.

The Maoist movement certainly has potential for transforming women's roles and gender-based ideology but not without contradictions and paradoxes. In the Maoist army women were usually given stereotypical roles such as food management, mending clothes, singing and dancing, collecting donations and recruitment, and carrying loads. Women are absent in the higher ranks, and in decision-making (Sharma and Prasain 2004:165). This was also admitted by Hisila Yami, stating that "There is still a problem in accepting women's leadership in the People's Army (Yami, 2007:7). Parvati confirmed this when she was interviewed by Yami: "Young women were very active, but once they got married they eventually became either the wives of leaders or vanished into oblivion" (Yami 2007:108).

The contribution of the Maoist movement to women's empowerment claimed by Yami and Parvati (2007), however, is disputable. If we may believe Hisila Yami, the wife of Babu Ram Battarai then women are indeed *empowered*: "Today the image of tired malnourished women carrying children at one end and rearing cattle at the other end has been transformed into an image of dignified fighting women with gun" (Yami, 2007: 11). The images of armed women are evidence of the movement's egalitarianism and "empowering" effects for Nepali women (Yami, 2007). The "people's war" has certainly precipitated new experiences for Nepali women of all backgrounds, whether in learning to use guns for combatant women, or negotiating the fine line of safety between state forces and the Maoists, for civilian women. Although joining the Maoists was a chance to break free from established positions, it is questionable whether it will bring structural changes for women in the long run (Pettigrew and Shneidermann, 2004). For example, members of Kathmandu-based feminist organizations are particularly unimpressed, accusing the Maoists of "behaving no differently than our 'men-stream' political parties. We never expected our male-dominated government to involve women in the peace process, but we thought you (Maoist leaders) were going to be different" (Pettigrew and Shneiderman, 2004: 2).

Since Nepali Maoist models for women's "empowerment" must negotiate between all-embracing Maoist ideologies and the existing evidence of gender discrimination in Nepali society embracing conservative Hindu cultural norms, there are noticeable gaps between rhetoric and practice. As elsewhere, the reality for Nepali women lies in the specifics of lived experience. Julie Bridgham's film *Sari Sisters* (2009) is relevant in that it gives an impression of women living in different realities influenced by the Maoist movement. It is important to adopt a more nuanced approach which acknowledges both women's multiple existing scripts for agency and the constraints within which they exercise it. Still, there is considerable evidence that, even if women in the Maoist movement did not get involved in decision-making or leadership positions, they still preferred to fight in the field to escape oppression at home by family members.

The above described socio-political changes also triggered new roles for women who did not actively join as fighters but stayed behind in their communities. In Sindhupalchowk, Kaski district, women reported to us:

> "We learnt everything that men also can do. We can also carry dead bodies, when men are not there to do this. Our men have left for various reasons: for the Maoists, for the army, for jobs outside this village, some went abroad: Iraq, Israel, Korea" (Pipalgaun, interview, 2009).
>
> "We are not embarrassed to do men's work when they return. In fact men do not do much work here. We can tell them what to do, but they are not doing it. Also when they come from their work they do not want to do anything at home" (Pipalgaun, interview, 2009)

Before and during the civil war many men had left the rural villages to work abroad, join the Maoists or the government's army. Women were left behind and forced to take up roles earlier carried out by men, such as ploughing. Feminisation of agriculture and the rural economy took place (Gartaula, Visser & Niehof, 2010). Although women already did the bulk of the farming activities, a lot of decision-making for instance related to crop selection was still in the hands of the men. Now women had to prepare the land, which is traditionally a men's task. In many areas, women are reported to be running forestry groups, and administering schools and other institutions.

However, this was not the first time that women were alone in rural areas. The Gurkha recruitment, the salt-grain trade or labor migration, were all reasons in the second half of the twentieth century that village women had to make do alone and take on stereotypically 'male' gendered roles (Gartaula, 2011). The insurgency has now provided those circumstances on a larger scale and at an increased speed, but by accident rather than design. Instead of being the success of the Maoist movement, these shifts in fact may be seen as instances of the "unexpected dynamics and spaces of ambivalence" that are identified as central to the formation of Maoist states (Pettigrew and Shneidermann, 2004: 7).

Ultimately, the fundamental changes in gender relations that the Maoists assert may not be the intentional outcome of their policies, but rather the result of the unexpected freedom of maneuver and social space for women's agency that were created by the political conflict.

5. Gender in Nepal

Gender provides a useful lens with which to analyze social institutions and processes, including the role of Farmer Field Schools in rural development in Nepal. Gender remains a central part of the understanding, and the objectives, of development; a gender focus has shown new aspects of understanding development. It provides the basis for deconstructing and understanding the reality of men's and women's lives and the gendered nature of economic, social and political processes (Pearson, 2000).

Gender is a term introduced to make the distinction between the biological or naturally given characteristics of men and women indicated by sex (Oakley, 1972) and the psychological and cultural differences between men and women. The argument to make a distinction between sex and gender is not because biological differences between men and women do not matter, but because social relations between men and women cannot be explained by biological differences or 'natural facts' only (Zwarteveen, 2006). Gender is an ordering principle, organizing and creating relations between men and women in a hierarchical way, as well as a process of giving meaning and obtaining recognition or legitimation.

The nature of gender relations – relations of power between women and men – is not easy to grasp in its full complexity. They are revealed not only in the division of labor and resources between women and men, but also in ideas and representations – the ascribing to women and men of different abilities, attitudes, desires, personality traits, behavior patterns, and so on (Agarwal, 1997:1). Gender can be seen as an organizing principle that shapes the processes of production and reproduction, consumption and arrangements such as distribution of labor, land and other valued resources in a society. By getting more insights in the experiences of men and women one gets a better understanding of social constructions of reality.

In Nepal the dominant—and often state-supported—ideologies regarding women are based upon conservative Hindu concepts of femininity. However, in the country reside over 60 non-Hindu ethnic groups who speak Tibeto-Burman languages together form a substantial proportion of the population, practicing a different religion. It is common knowledge that gender relations among these groups often are often based on more egalitarian kinship and economic structures, and differ widely from the normative Hindu image.

In Nepal, a common understanding is that men are responsible for earning economic resources (such as material income, land, livestock etc.) to support the family. Most of the work that requires public contact (e.g. attending public meetings, agricultural extension or demonstration sessions) is performed by men. Also, some activities such as ploughing, fixing a roof, slaughtering animals and felling large trees are performed exclusively by men. Women are responsible for maintaining food security, the household chores and rearing of children (Acharya and Bennett, 1981). Although in sociology such dichotomies are often criticized, even a recent study (Giri, 2009) still maintains that women perceive themselves as nurturers

and men as providers, despite the empirical fact that women spend more time than men in productive activities.

Nepalese society is patriarchal, male dominated, and most ethnic/caste groups are patrilineally organized. Women's economic and social positions are generally dependent on those of their husbands, fathers and/or fathers-in-law (Gartaula, 2011). Women are traditionally disadvantaged with regard to education, health, labor force, economic conditions and social welfare (Tiwari, 2007). Certain Nepali proverbs reflect the general societal valuation and position of women in Nepal and indicate that women have not only a low status, but also a low self-esteem. Though such proverbs are less commonly used nowadays in educated urban households, they still reflect widespread views on women in Nepal, as mirrored in the following examples: *Chhora paye swarga jaane* ("The birth of a son paves the way to heaven"); *Chhori ko janma hare ko karma* ("A daughter is born with a doomed fate"); *Chhora bhaye sansar ujyalo, Chhori bhaye bhanchha ujyalo* ("A son brightens the whole world, whereas a daughter brightens only the kitchen").

Marriage has a huge impact on a woman's life. The event of marriage determines almost all her life options and subsequent livelihood. According to Hindu tradition, marriage is essential for everybody, whether man or woman. Early marriages are rooted in both the concept of purity of the female body (Bennett, 1983) and the need for helping hands in farm households in general. Parents prefer to get their daughters married before puberty. Although this practice has changed over the years, the ideology of women's sexuality still prevails: 33.5% of girls marry between the ages of 15-19, as opposed to only 11.8% of boys at the same age (CBS, 2002). Marriage is a social contract between two clans rather than the personal affair of the bride and groom. Among the urban educated so-called love marriages often take place, but in rural areas women and also men rarely have any role in the choice of their own life partners. Women's status in society is mostly dependent on their husbands' and parents' social and economic positions. According to legal experts, there are over 20 laws that discriminate against women (CEDAW, 2004).

Due to the dependency on men in daily life, Nepalese women face problems like domestic violence, psychological harassment for dowry, and low opportunity in finding jobs (Dhakal, 2008). Women's lives are centered around their traditional roles of taking care of children and most household chores, fetching water and animal fodder and doing farm work. Property rights to land are inherited through the male line, but a father can give the right to a particular plot of land to his daughter during his life. Even though men own the land, women are the ones who do most of the labor related to agricultural production, such as digging, planting, weeding, harvesting and storage.

In general, agriculture in Nepal is labor intensive and women play a significant role in various crop production activities. Women work 12 or 13 hours a day while men work only eight or nine hours a day, depending on the season. Women work both outside and inside the household and have less leisure time than men (Giri, 2009; Tiwari,2007; Bhadra and Shah, 2007; Joshi, 2000). Men are in charge of land preparation and marketing aspects, as well as providing and applying inputs such as chemical fertilizer and pesticides. Women are

responsible for a large part of the subsistence economy, but their contributions have been overlooked as they rarely become visible in the cash economy (Bhadra and Shah, 2007). The contribution of women is underexposed partly because their work is not economically valued and reflected in statistics (Joshi, 2000).

Research in Lalitpur and in the Central region (Joshi, 2000) shows that women's involvement in rice production activities exceeds that of men's. Ploughing, irrigation, and threshing were mostly done by men but all other rice agronomic practices were primarily done by women. On their own farms, women did most of the levelling, fertilizer application, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, winnowing, and storing of grain and rice straw. In exchange labor with other families, fertilizing, transplanting, weeding, and post-harvest activities were primarily done by women. In all, women contributed 65% and men contributed 35% of all activities of family rice production. In winter, the gender division of labor in wheat production closely followed the pattern found in rice production (idem).

In the past, women could only share their views among themselves and received little information from their husbands on economic and social developments. They were not allowed to participate in public meetings or discussions and were not informed of outside activities. Recently, the situation is changing even if the actual significance of their contribution in these meetings remains limited (Agarwal, 2001). Women are increasingly participating in 'platforms' for decision-making and other common fora (Upreti, 2001; Agarwal, 2009, 2001, 1997; Banjade, Schanz, & Leeuwis, 2006). Our research shows that Farmer Field Schools have certainly contributed to this process (Westendorp, 2012).

It is a fact that women also participate in the process of maintaining the structure and the discursive practices that caused their secondary positions. One way in which they participate is through using and maintaining perspectives that marginalize them or articulate their subordinate position. The way women treat their daughters or maintain their son's preferential treatment contributes to keeping women's inferior position intact.

For a long time, women's participation in agriculture remained underexposed due to biased data collection, the fact that their contribution was not reported or officially acknowledged (Gartaula, 2011). The economic contribution of Nepali women is substantial, but still remains largely unnoticed because their traditional role is taken for granted. The percentage of female-headed households has increased from 13.6% in 1996 to 26.6% in 2011 (CBS, 2011)[7]. FAO has reported that 90.5% of women are engaged in agriculture against 74.9% of men (FAO, Sustainable Development report)[8]. Together with DFID, World Bank, and ADB they express their concerns about the increased participation of women in agriculture (FAO, 2007). This is a global phenomenon that can be clearly observed in Nepal:

> "Over the recent years (2002-2005), the agriculture sector recorded a rather low growth rate of 3 percent a year on average. The negative impact of this low performance on the living conditions was reduced by substantial

[7] Upon a population of 12.9 million men against 13.7 million women, an increase of 15% (CBS, 2012).
[8] http://www.fao.org/sd/WPdirect/WPre0110.htm, Sustainable Development Dimensions Fact Sheet (accessed 12 January 2012).

> increase in non-farm incomes, especially remittances. The increase of migration (and thus remittances) could be a result of the long-standing conflict and low economic performance in the country. However, migration and displacements may have created new forms of vulnerabilities, especially for women head of households. The [Maoist] conflict opened an opportunity for women to be empowered, though at the cost of overwhelming economic responsibilities in many cases. Women have taken additional responsibility on household management, crop production, livestock rearing and decision on marketing of their livestock, horticultural and agricultural products. The findings indicate that women have relatively greater participation in petty trade and road side sales of vegetables and fruits which are more disrupted by frequent blockades and strikes." (FAO, 2007:5)

This trend has led to changes in social relations and structures, leading to the so-called feminisation of agriculture and rural life (Giri, 2009; Gartaula, Visser, & Niehof, 2010). The changes include the availability of remittances, an increased workload for women, as well as a shift in women's responsibilities and their participation in the public sphere. Feminisation of agriculture refers to an increase in the number of women involved in farming or the time spent by women on agriculture. The feminisation of agriculture can be differentiated between labor and decision-making or managerial tasks within the rural household. In rural Nepal both have been observed, although the latter is less visible. In absence of their husbands, there is an increased role for women in agriculture and they have taken up additional 'male' tasks such as ploughing, pesticide application, and feeding livestock (Gartaula, Visser, & Niehof, 2010). Women living with their in-laws have less decision-making power than *de facto* female headed households (idem).

Women likewise emphasized this development during our interviews: "Men have left: for Maoists, for jobs outside this village, some went abroad". (Focus group discussion, female FFS farmers Sindhupalchowk, 2009). There was not only migration in search of jobs, but also many men have left Nepal to study abroad. In 2002 this was still a rare opportunity, in 2009 many farmers elaborated about (mostly male) family members who studied in the United States of America, United Kingdom, Australia or Russia. What was unusual in 2002 had become common practice in rural areas in 2009 (Westendorp, 2012).

6. FFS Intervention in Nepal

In 2000 FFS project management decided to introduce a better selection system because they wanted to attract 'real farmers' who wanted to learn about farming. They did not want 'opportunistic' men in the training that would neither apply the technology offered, nor use the knowledge. They wanted people to complete the entire season-long training. An intensive selection process was introduced, through meetings in which basically an entire village (men and women) took part, in order to identify potential participants. In these gatherings we conducted a gender analysis with the villagers, discussing the labor related to rice culture or any other crop that would get the focus in FFS. Villagers were invited to discuss the different roles and responsibilities of men and women in relation to this crop. Vivid and interesting

debates ensued and a session usually ended with the community concluding that women take a larger part of the workload and responsibilities in most crops. As a result, we selected more women as participants in FFS. Soon FFS facilitators discovered that women anyway appeared to be more committed participants than most men, and the facilitators themselves also started encouraging more women to participate in FFS.

This process coincided with an effort by the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives to include women more in their agricultural services. The Ministry imposed a 33% quota of women participants in farmer training. This move was influenced by the Women in Development paradigm that was influential in the development scene at the turn of the century. It became well accepted by many staff and policymakers that the important role of women in agriculture in Nepal required to be reflected in the FFS project (Van de Fliert & Proost, 1999). As a result of these parallel societal and institutional shifts, from 2000 onwards more and more women participated in FFS, mostly from the higher caste. In 2009 it was found that the majority of FFS participants (60%) were women (DADO registration in Kavre, 2009; Westendorp, 2012).

In all FFS training a kind of standard curriculum is offered. To all farmers in a certain context, similar information or knowledge is presented. Not all information or knowledge is applied in the same way by the participants. Looking at the social effects from a gender perspective and household level research data (Gartaula, 2011; Westendorp, 2012) shows a different impact of FFS on male and female livelihoods. Particularly women said that they did not adopt technologies that were too technical, like fertilizer calculations. Nor did they follow practices that were too labor intensive, like observing the fields on a regular basis and preparing pesticide alternatives. Women stressed that many aspects were too technical, too difficult such as simulation trials, or fertilizer application related to a certain growth stage and fertilizer calculations.

On the other hand, interviews and FGDs we held in 2009 revealed that, in contrast to men, women can recall detailed knowledge they gained in FFS training, even after eight years), about the number of seedlings per hill, planting distance, times of weeding, as well as all activities related to their duties in the farming system in relation to food crops, especially rice and to some extent in maize. The women were keen to show their knowledge and proud to say that they still apply it in farming practice. Food crop production increased and households clearly benefited from their skills and knowledge gained in FFS.

Even though vegetable production is stimulated by the government, it is not necessarily accepted and passively adopted by all (female) farmers. With increased responsibilities for women in agriculture, in particular food security, the production of vegetables in Kavre, Tanahun and Kaski had not expanded among women (Westendorp, 2012). Women admitted that they found vegetable production not beneficial: (I do not know where to sell, and “how much can we eat”; “I gave up, it was too much work for too little output”; “I have no market access”. “I do not have time for vegetable production, I am busy with rice and *kodo* (millet)” said women in Kavre (interviews in Kavre & Sindhupalchowk, 2009). “I learnt about vegetables but I am alone so I do not know what to do with all the harvest, and I stopped”,

said another woman in the neighboring village of Sindhupalchowk (interview, 2009). Another woman added: “We eat little vegetables but after FFS I produced so much and did not know how to market them, so I stopped with the cauliflower production” (Kavre, interview, 2009). In the field women expressed a need to increase the production of food crops rather than vegetables for cash, they wanted to learn more about rice or millet production. For women the key learning point was the fact that they could get a yield increase with less seedlings, or a larger planting distance.

Clearly women use the information differently from men. Women shared common interests in FFS. The women we interviewed all felt responsible for food production and were interested in working together with fellow women farmers to help each other to achieve it. Farming activities were often undertaken together by the women: weeding, harvesting, and planting. But the application of knowledge also depends on the opportunities or availability of resources she had. Women appeared to be interested to participate in FFS to learn about farming and to contribute to the food security of their family. Men, on the other hand, were interested to use FFS to increase their livelihood options, to widen job opportunities or to earn a better income. For example, a Dalit woman said that she could not apply the knowledge she learnt on vegetables because her husband did not give her the land to grow vegetables (interview, Yamdi, 2009).

While women evidently benefitted from FFS, especially in their role as food providers, men showed a decrease in interest in FFS participation during the first decade of this century. Men, generally, displayed less interest in skills to improve food production, but wanted to use FFS to increase income through cash crops, like vegetable production for the market or to gain access to off-farm labor. Men proved to be more interested in non-farming activities, or at least income generation. This reflects their role as ‘breadwinner’, according to the expectations of Nepali rural society that men should provide an income for the family.

Many men who had participated in FFS tried to use the training to get a better connection to the outside world, the world beyond their village community. Quite a few (eight in Kavre district) have become farmer trainers. Others got employment with local NGOs. Several men have used the FFS training certificate to get a job abroad, mainly in Malaysia and the Arabic world as casual laborer.

An exception were small groups of young, educated men (20 – 25 years) who had taken an interest in working in commercial vegetable production in Bhaktapur, Kavre and Tanahun. In particular in areas that were within a day´s travelling from the district headquarter or other markets, young men became increasingly involved in vegetable production, such as tomato, potato and cauliflower. They are creative, innovative and started to experiment with different cash crops. In this way ginger production increased after FFS intervention. According to these young men cash crop production offered them a better alternative than migration: “We can make more money with pleasant work here in vegetable production than if we went to Arab or Malaysia” (Kavre, interview, 2009). Young male farmers in Bhaktapur district said they were only interested in taking part in FFS if they could develop entrepreneurial skills in the training (Bhaktapur, interview male farmer, 2009) or learned about marketing (Bhaktapur,

interview male farmer, 2009).

7. FFS and Empowerment

At the turn of the century one of the objectives of FFS shifted from integrated pest management and agricultural production to broader intentions like farmer's empowerment. FFS project management saw Farmer Field Schools as vehicles for the empowerment of farmers (Ooi, 1998; Pontius, Dilts, & Bartlett, 2002). At FFS programme management level it was assumed that everybody had the same understanding of the concept of empowerment. However, our data show (Westendorp, 2012) that male and female farmers differ in their views on empowerment and that there is a big gap between policy makers, FFS facilitators and female and male farmers regarding the perception of empowerment.

Our research showed that empowerment is a social process that challenges project implementer's assumptions about empowerment as a deliverable, a product. Male and female FFS participants said that they experienced empowerment, but not in the way FFS technicians and policymakers had planned it, going through a rationally designed set of steps: identifying a problem in the field, experimenting with a solution and drawing conclusions. Our survey showed that women without FFS experience saw empowerment as increased individual strength, personal growth, stretching their comfort zone. "Empowerment means that I am able to do most things myself; I feel empowered because I can now buy a lipstick without my husband's permission" (Female farmers in group discussion, Sanga, 2009).

Women who took part in FFS mainly experienced empowerment as increased self-confidence and involvement in work and group activities. Men's idea of empowerment was much more focused on their capacity to contribute to the improvement of society, on action outside the household which would contribute to their prestige. FFS trainers spoke about empowerment in terms of a result of technology transfer or a change in behavior that they had facilitated among farmers. Apparently, FFS staff had a very technical and non-political approach towards empowerment, not based on male and female farmers' realities in rural Nepal.

Most FFS facilitators claimed that they could empower farmers without considering farmers' interests and agency. FFS facilitators did not see empowerment as a process of which farmers themselves were actively part. FFS thus "rendered technical" (Li, 2007) a complex social, cultural, economic and political process of rural development by defining empowerment as a non-political tool, an asset that FFS participants could be taught, that they could learn to 'own'. Consequently, gender differentiation, experiences of women being different from men, and institutional structures surrounding poor and disempowered female farmers and keeping them locked into poverty and powerless, were not addressed.

The participatory processes, group discussions, and discovery-learning approach we employed has encouraged farmers to raise their voice, to think critically. This trend coincided with the political changes described above. Patterns of access and control to resources changed in Nepal particularly in favor of women.

Some FFS female interviewees said that today they have more access to resources such as land: "I also got land rights from my husband and mother and father-in-law" (female farmer,

Sindhupalchowk, interview, 2009). “Yes, previously my husband decided everything in the farm, these days he takes my idea to make a decision. I also got land rights from my husband” (female farmer, Tanahun, interview, 2008). It is hard to tell if this is a result from FFS participation, but it is clear that FFS participation took place at a time that women started gaining access to important resources such as land.

FFS has indeed contributed to an increase in women’s knowledge and skills, boosted their confidence in participation in community events and speaking in public, and it enlarged their network outside the domestic sphere. Women have evidently taken up more responsibilities and tasks, even taking decisions that were previously the prerogative of men only (Gartaula, 2011; Westendorp, 2012). In terms of agronomic practices women may now decide on the cropping pattern and the timing of agronomic practices. Also, they increasingly decide which variety to grow. “We cannot decide to buy or sell land but we can decide how to farm” (Kavre, female farmer, interview, 2009). With restricted outside support or services it was observed that women developed strong ties among themselves. In all the villages visited during this research in 2009 (N=23), the women gave the impression of having close collaboration, especially among the same caste group or ethnic community. Even in multiple caste/ethnic societies the women closely collaborated to produce food and to help each other in dire times.

In rural villages women can even be seen to plough fields. Also women have been involved in carrying out the last rites at a funeral if there was no male relative available to perform the religious acts as part of the funeral ceremony (Sindupalchowk, female farmer, interview, 2009). These are exceptional cases, but show a certain room for maneuver in difficult times.

Through FFS women were breaking away from their habitual shy behavior in public. Women gained self-confidence, they obtained a voice in the weekly group sessions as a result of the social space, the FFS team spirit and solidarity that was provided in these meetings. Indeed, this ‘social capital route’ of empowerment is rather different from the ‘human capital ‘route that men follow in empowerment in Nepal (Bartlett, 2005). For almost all the women taking part in FFS it was their first time in participating in an agricultural training, which was previously considered a men's business. Until recently agricultural technicians only approached men for agricultural training or demonstrations. Women also expressed that they now felt more appreciated as a partner in farming. “My husband wants to know what I think about agriculture, since I have taken part in FFS. Also my in-laws respect my new skills and knowledge” (female farmer, interview, Kavre, 2009).

Several female FFS participants have become farmer trainers. A role previously unheard of for women but an opportunity that became available after taking part in FFS and could be materialized at times when women took a leading role in the world of farming in Nepal. Sometimes an increase in mobility was seen as empowerment: “My husband encouraged me to participate in FFS, now I have no hesitation in attending training, tours and community meetings” (Kavre, female farmer, interview 2008).

FFS evidently lead to changes in gender relationships. Men increasingly appreciated women’s role in farming and valued their knowledge gained in FFS. Women were considered more important actors in agriculture and were taken seriously by agricultural public service staff.

World Education staff realized that female FFS graduates were in high demand as agricultural laborers because of their increased knowledge and skills (World Education staff member, interview, Kathmandu, 2002).

In some cases female FFS participants reported changes in relationships with their husband, in-laws or other community members. “Before FFS my parents-in-law treated me as a domestic helper. These days that has changed and also the relationship with my husband is good, he does not deny what I do” (female farmer, Lalitpur 2008). “My relation with my husband and father- and mother in-law have changed; I get more freedom, I am free to participate in group and social activities” (female farmer, Tanahun, 2009). Some mentioned that they now treat their children differently from their own experience. “I treat my son and daughter equally with food, education and other things” (female farmer, Kavre, 2009).

Through FFS women in Nepal have gained self-confidence and access to resources such as knowledge and skills, and even as well as land. Several female farmers replied that they can now make choices which were previously denied to them historically and/or culturally. They added that this was not so much the result of the process of discovery learning in FFS as it is assumed by policy-makers, but of their group participation, collective singing and presenting, and their capacity to speak in public.

For women empowerment seems to be a process of expansion of their comfort zone. They have become more skilled and more confident in farming, a domain in which they were already active but where they have now gained more control over production processes.

8. Conclusion and Discussion

The data in this article were collected during a longitudinal study of the first author in Nepal. When Farmer Field Schools were introduced in Nepal in 1997, this was also the time that the Maoists officially declared their revolution. When data were collected in 2002 there was a revolution going on and there were heavy fights between Maoists, the army and civilians. Many men had fled their homes to escape the violence and to resist being taken by either the government or the Maoists army. In 2001 King Birendra and a large part of his Royal family were murdered and the political scene was in turmoil. Migration for jobs abroad was at a rise and the number of female-headed households in rural villages had increased. In 2009 during the last part of the research, Nepal was in a flux again; a federal government had been elected, the Maoists had become part of the government, but disputes remained.

The ‘people’s war’ precipitated new experiences for Nepali men and women of all backgrounds. FFS was introduced to increase agricultural production but proved to provide empowerment opportunities in particular for women. The process of group work, participatory approaches in training, and discovery learning that are part of FFS contributed to their empowerment.

It was assumed at the start of the project that the difference between men and women was a cultural matter and was no concern to FFS implementation, but this assumption was challenged during the course of project implementation, and particularly during subsequent research in 2009.

Despite the fact that FFS did not address certain conditions in society producing inequality, discrimination and social exclusion, modifications of the wider social-economic and political conditions in Nepal did indeed influence the performance of FFS. The benefits in terms of empowerment seemed to be more evident among women than among men. Most men went on with 'business as usual', while women clearly became actively engaged with changing their livelihood.

Traditionally women have fewer prospects or chances than men in Nepal. FFS has offered opportunities to women through agricultural training that were previously denied to them, discovering new options, new possibilities and eventually making better informed decisions in farming. In the course of a decade it has now become an accepted norm for women to take part in agricultural extension activities.

We have applied Kabeer's concept of empowerment (2001) showing the linkage between resources and agency. Evidently, the increase in knowledge and social capital women obtained through their participation in FFS leads to an increase in agency and capabilities. Participants, both women and men, expanded their framework for information, knowledge, room for maneuver, and their space for negotiation. Empowerment, however, is not restricted to women in development. Importantly, men and women have different objectives to make use of their new knowledge and skills. Men predominantly used their FFS training to engage in vegetable farming and market access or access to non-farm job opportunities, while women strengthened their role and position as food producers increasing food security of their families. Interviews confirmed that empowerment is a complex, multi-faceted process, which is not easily quantified or measured, let alone regulated in a technical way. Clearly, empowerment is not a product that can be accessed or owned, but a developmental process of male and female participants in FFS.

This process, however, does not take place independently of its structural and institutional context. For women in particular this process took place in the group they were in with FFS. FFS was a respected forum were women could participate. They felt safe, secure and confident to act in a group with like-minded people with whom they interacted on a regular basis in the weekly FFS sessions. The social space and solidarity that was provided in the group contributed to their empowerment, also in the wider society. Our findings are corroborated by Bartlett (2005) for women who took part in FFS in Bangladesh.

These developments were not anticipated in 1997 when agriculture was still considered the key to growth and development in Nepal. It was not expected that interest in farming among youth would drastically decline, nor was the feminisation of agriculture anticipated. The project was not designed with a Maoist revolution in mind. FFS started a process that was unpredictable in its course, its outcomes and consequences, due to involvement of multiple stakeholders, and to changing social, economic, and political conditions. FFS provided opportunities to promote women's abilities and capacities. FFS provided an environment where women's agency was promoted. In addition, the war created opportunities for women to take life more in their own hands, and to exercise their agency, in agriculture as well as in other domains of life.

Project outcomes are often unpredictable, especially in times of conflict or war. A gender

analysis provides us insights in the different experiences of men and women's experiences in this context. Greater attention for opportunities for women to exercise their agency can improve development outcomes, can contribute to empowerment at times when society is in a flux.

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