

## **Paper 7: Participation of Women in West Gandak Water Users' Association\***

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This paper is based on part of the research results of the Gender Poverty and Water Research in Nepal by the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), which is funded by Ford Foundation.

The aim of the overall research is to:

- improve the understanding of inclusion and exclusion processes in agency supported irrigation, with special reference to poor women and men.
- formulate recommendations for inclusive intervention approaches, that primarily strengthen the rights to irrigated land and water by poor women and men.
- improve the capacity to address gender and poverty issues of researchers, policy makers and farmer leaders.

In Nepal the two research sites are selected West Gandak and Andhi Khola. In this paper only one aspect of the research in West Gandak is discussed, namely the impact of the affirmative action<sup>1</sup> policy by the Water User Association (WUA) and the selection mechanism to mobilize women in decision-making bodies of the West Gandak WUA.

Open interviews with individual farmers and small groups are the main inputs for this paper. Individual interviews with women members of different tiers of the West Gandak WUA were held to hear from them the bottlenecks they have experienced and the ambition they have. Apart from these, interviews with farmers and farmer representatives, both male and female, were held to hear from them how they judge the participation of women in the West Gandak WUA.

In the first part of this paper, we will discuss Irrigation Management Transfer in West Gandak, the organizational structure of the West Gandak WUA and the policies and

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\* The heading in the previous print be corrected accordingly.

<sup>1</sup> Affirmative action in this case is the rule that at least one elected and one selected female should be member of the Upatoli Committees, and that 4 women members have a position in the Board of Directors. This rule is stated in the constitution of the WUA.

measures to enhance female participation in water management. In the second part of this paper, we will discuss the impact of these policies and measures, and conclusive notes are given.

## **IRRIGATION MANAGEMENT TRANSFER IN WEST GANDAK**

In 1993, the government of Nepal began the implementation of its Irrigation Policy which envisaged the transfer of irrigation management responsibility to democratically elected legal Water User Associations (Kalu and Satyal, 1998). Irrigation Management Transfer (IMT) is meant to bring more decision making power and responsibilities to decentralized levels and to increase the productivity of the irrigation systems. An expected outcome of IMT is to improve operation and maintenance of irrigation systems, while cutting down in public expenses on irrigation. To materialize this policy in the West Gandak irrigation system, several programs and projects have been implemented. The latest in this range was the Irrigation Management Transfer Project (IMTP), which was carried out from 1995 to 1998, as its first phase.

The IMTP is designed to guide the process of transfer of management from a situation of joint management of the Department of Irrigation (DOI) and Water User Association to a situation where the WUA has the final responsibility of the entire management of the system. In this process of transfer, a considerable participation of women in Committees was attempted. In the IMTP the different actors were prepared for their new tasks and responsibilities. The government obliged itself to deliver a fully rehabilitated irrigation system and to provide training for the farmer representatives to be able to prepare themselves to take over the management of the irrigation system. The farmers were organized in a Water Users Association according to the Water Resources Act of 1992. Finally in November 1997 the entire West Gandak irrigation system was handed over to the WUA, only the management of the Headwork remained the responsibility of DOI. The IMTP is financed by several donors (AsDB and USAID), the DOI and the WUA itself contributed 26% in the rehabilitation cost.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE WEST GANDAK WUA**

In order for an organization to function, accountability from the leaders to the lower levels is a prerequisite; an important characteristic of a successful organization is the members' trust in its leaders.

West Gandak is an extensive irrigation system, covering 8,700 hectares where 14,000 farmer families have their land (Yadav, 1998). In such a vast irrigation system it is difficult to guarantee a free information flow from the lowest to the highest levels and vice versa. So, the question arises: what is the direct influence a farmer has on the management of the irrigation system, irrespective of whether one is male or female, rich or poor? To answer this question first a brief outline of the organizational structure of the West Gandak WUA is given.

## **West Gandak WUA: a Four Tiered Organization**

The Water User Association in West Gandak was formed in 1993. The WUA is a four tiered organization based on the hydrologic boundaries of the irrigation system. The organizational chart is given in figure 1.

### ***The Upatoli Group***

The water users of the sub tertiary level form the *Upatoli* Group. This *Upatoli* Group consists of 20 to 100 water users, depending on the size of the sub tertiary canal. Once every four years<sup>2</sup> elections are held to elect the 5 to 9 members of the *Upatoli* Committee, which includes the representatives for the *Toli* Committee and the representatives for the General Assembly. A well functioning *Upatoli* Committee has a meeting every month. The *Upatolis* which receive water straight from the main canal, are directly represented in the Board of Directors, the other *Upatolis* are represented through the *Toli* and the Branch Committees.

The West Gandak WUA consists of 173 *Upatoli* Groups (IAAS, RTDB/DOI, 1998a).

### ***The Toli Group***

On average 8 to 10 *Upatoli* Groups are clustered in one *Toli* Group. All *Upatoli* Committees in the Minor canals send one representative to the *Toli* Committee meetings, which according the constitution should be held every month. During these meetings issues of the tertiary level are discussed. The West Gandak WUA counts 19 *Toli* Committees (Yadav, 1998). Some *Toli* groups, which do not receive water via a Branch, are directly represented in the Board of Directors.

### ***The Branch Committee***

Two to four *Toli* Groups are clustered in one Branch. Tertiary canals, which are supplied by one and the same branch canal send a *Toli* representative to the Branch Committee meetings; this representative is elected every four years. The West Gandak WUA has 3 Branch Groups.

### ***Board of Directors***

For the main system a Board of Directors (BoD) is formed out of 35 representatives of the different tiers: *Upatolis*, *Tolis* and Branches and the four female representatives selected by the Regional Committees.

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<sup>2</sup>In the amendment of 1997 the period for functionaries is extended from 2 to 4 years.

These representatives and the General Assembly members can nominate themselves as candidate for the position of the chairman and vice chairman of the BoD. Together these two bodies elect the two office bearers. At this moment the Board counts 40 members<sup>3</sup>.

The irrigation system is divided in four regions. In each region a Regional Committee is formed to facilitate decentralized decision making, monitoring and coordination. The members in the Board of Directors are the ex-officio members of the respective Regional Committees. Each Regional Committee selects one woman to take up a position in the Regional Committee and in the Board of Directors. The Regional Committee members select a chairperson amongst themselves.

### *General Assembly*

One representative of each Upatoli Committee forms a system-wide General Assembly. The General Assembly meets once a year. The main task of this highest body is to control the Board of Directors and to approve the policy of the organization. During the General Assembly the Board gives an overview of its performance during the last year and presents its plans for the coming years.

The General Assembly is the most important meeting for farmers to influence the overall management of the irrigation system. Issues, which are of importance at Upatoli level, are brought forward by the respective representatives. However, it depends much on the own initiative of the representative, to which extend the points discussed at the General Assembly are fed back to the other farmers of the Upatoli.

### *Executive Committee*

The Executive Committee is a five-member committee formed by members of the Board of Directors, responsible for day to day technical, administrative and financial management of the system. Under the technical section a system wide organizational structure is implemented, which is responsible for water delivery and takes care of maintenance and repair of the infrastructure. This Water Management Work Force (*karyadal*) can be considered as an operational body, which is organized according the canal lay-out:

- for the main canal and overall coordination (*mool karyadal*)
- for branch and minor levels (*tewa karyadal*)
- for lower canal levels (*sewa karyadal*)

Members of the *mool karyadal* are selected by the Board of Directors, while the *tewa* members are selected by the respective branch and Toli Committees and the *sewa* members are selected by the concerning Upatoli Committee. The work force is accountable to the

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<sup>3</sup> The total number varies between 39-41 and depends on if the chairman and vice chairman come from within the BoD representatives or from the General Assembly.

body by which they are selected. Work Force members receive training to be prepared for their tasks. While the elected members of the Committees bear office only for a limited period, the trained members of the Work Force will hold a permanent position. For this reasons these organizations are supposed to have enough continuity to guarantee that the necessary knowledge and experience to carry out technical maintenance works is available within the organization.

At each level, the members of the Work Force have been granted the status of non-voting membership in the WUA. A provision in the constitution has been made that no member of the Work Force could contest the election for any position in WUA at any level while being member of the Work Force (IAAS, RTDB/DOI, 1998b).

In contrast to Committee members, Work Force members are paid. Work force members of the lowest levels receive 20% of the Irrigation Service Fee (ISF) collection as remuneration. Members of the *mool* karyadal get a nominal monthly salary.

In total 10 women are selected in the *sewa* and *tewa*. All these women participated in the training organized by IMTP in canal operation and management. An overview of the number of farmers participating in the Work Force is given in Table 1, also indicating the number of female Work Force members.

**Table 1: List of Total Members in Water Management Work Force**

Group	Canal	No. Work Force members	
		Total	Women
Mool	Main	5	0
Tewa	Branch/minors	52	5
Sewa	MCs/ MFDs/ SFDs.	152	5
Total		209	10

Source: IAAS, RTDB/DOI, 1998b

## **DIRECT FARMER INFLUENCE ON MANAGEMENT**

As can be read from the preceding section, farmers can influence on management in different ways:

- participate in Upatoli meetings
- elect Upatoli Committee member
- elect Toli Committee member
- elect General Assembly representative
- direct contact with farmer leaders

The elections take place once in four years. Only those water users who have shares can take part in elections and are eligible for a post in a Committee. To become a shareholder, one has to present a land certificate. To participate in a meeting, one has to be member of the concerning Committee. Decisions on water distribution and organizing maintenance sessions for the respective levels are taken in these meetings.

For those farmers who are not shareholders, the options to influence the management are:

- direct contact with farmer leaders
- mobilize the land owner

It goes without saying that the personal contacts with farmer leaders is an important strategy for farmers, shareholders or not, who face a specific problem. After all, the other options do not lead to solutions on short term. At field level, farmers discuss the water distribution among themselves, they do not arrange special meetings for this. Share ownership is not decisive at this level.

It looks like the representation from farmers to higher levels in the organization works quite well: elections guarantee a certain justification for representation. Question remains however, if decisions at higher levels are communicated back to the lower levels. This seems to be a cross cutting problem for the WUA as a whole.

## **FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN THE WEST GANDAK WUA**

### **Evolution**

In the national Irrigation Policy it is stated that: 'Necessary emphasis shall be given to the provision that there should be at least 20% female users in all the executive units of the WUA' (Irrigation Policy, article 2.3, 1992). However, until recently neither the West Gandak WUA nor the DOI actively promoted the participation of women in the WUA. Hardly any women became members of Committees in the WUA.

The latest amendment to the constitution, accepted by the General Assembly in 1997, made it compulsory to have at least one elected and one selected female member in the Upatoli Committee. The 1998 elections show a dramatic increase of the number of women involved in the WUA. In more than 80% of the Upatoli Committees there is now at least one female member.

Table 2 presents historical figures on female participation in the different tiers of the WUA.

**Table 2: Organizational level & number of functionaries of the West Gandak WUA**

	First election, 1993		Second Election, 1995		Third election, 1998	
	# of functionaries	# female functionaries	# of functionaries	# female functionaries	# of functionaries	# female functionaries
General Assembly	155	3	171	3	173	2
Board of Directors <sup>4</sup>	-	-	-	-	40	4
Branch Committee	39	0	40	0	44	0
Toli Committee	83	1	95	2	98	0
Upatoli Committee	1143	7	1268	23	1179	145

Source: IAAS, RTDB/DOI, 1998a

As can be concluded from the table, hardly any women appear in the Toli and Branch Committees. In the Upatoli Committees, the bodies where the Toli representatives are elected, there is apparently a lack of confidence that women are able to represent the Upatoli as a whole. As a consequence there appear also no women in the Branch Committees, as these are elected out of the Toli representatives.

In the following paragraph we would like to analyze how the selection of the female Upatoli members took place.

### **Selection Mechanisms**

The figures in Table 2 show that before 1997 a very limited number of women came forward to nominate themselves for election. The 1997 amendment made the Upatoli responsible for having at least one elected and one selected female member in the Upatoli Committee. There were no directions how to select women for the Committees. As a consequence, the members of the outgoing Committee normally selected a woman out of their direct kin or political network. Other women were selected because of their experience in community work (health work, or adult education), and some were selected because they were active irrigators.

Most of the women selected do not have water shares in their name, because they do not have irrigated land in ownership. Formally, being a shareholder is a precondition to become member of the WUA and get a position in a Committee.

In one Upatoli, the Committee members felt really limited because they had to select a female member who owns shares. This resulted in the selection of a candidate who is aged and illiterate instead of a motivated and knowledgeable person.

<sup>4</sup> The Board of Directors came into existence in 1997.

However in some Upatolis it is accepted for the husband (landowner) to write a consent letter to indicate that his wife can participate using the shares registered in his name.

In general however, is 'having shares' not seen as very strict condition for membership of female members. We even came across the case where nobody in the household owns shares, but the wife has become female member of the Upatoli. She had been elected because of her qualification and affiliation with the local elite. It was decided unanimously that she would be the best candidate.

Another interesting case is a woman who has been a representative in the WUA since the very first election. She has got shares registered in her own name though she does not have formal land ownership. She said it was possible to register the shares in her name because she has been holding a post in the WUA.

Women's status in the Upatoli is thus different from that of men: men are elected by a majority and are landowners. Women are selected (in stead of elected) and in general do not have water shares.

## **PERCEPTIONS ON AND IMPACT OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION**

### **Perception of Female Office Bearers**

We interviewed 13 women with a position in WUA. Of these, six are the main irrigators of the household. Five are involved in agriculture. They are important decision-makers but not the main irrigators. Only two are not involved at all in agriculture (one is appointed because of her political affiliations, the other woman is a well off lady). Six women have organizational experience and are relatively well educated (more than grade 7). Of these, 4 women were health trainer or involved in adult education. Five women out of 13 are either kin or have political affiliation with the person who came to recruit her for a certain position.

Most female office bearers expressed their concern that they are not well informed about their tasks in the organization. Four women (out of 13) told us that they had no idea what their function implied, other women could indicate some of their tasks but expressed the wish to be further informed. Some women feel that the male members of the organization purposely keep relevant information behind; the female members of the BoD told that their fellow farmers refused them to consult the constitution. Some women do not know if they really are invited for every meeting. Female office bearers face difficulties to be accepted by males who occupy a lower rank in the organization.



## **Perception of Male and Female Farmers on Women's Participation in Upatoli<sup>5</sup>**

The perception of men on women's participation is in general positive:

- If women are present, meetings pass off quietly and in a more disciplined way.
- Women give a good example. If women participate in cleaning and maintenance, men cannot refuse. If even women are collecting Irrigation Service Fees or request to participate in maintenance work, it is difficult for men to withdraw.
- It is easier for female office bearers to influence the behavior of other women. Women make dung cakes for which they use the canal bed to dry. According to the men interviewed this makes the canal silt up quickly. Women also use the clay of the canal bed to make pots, which makes the canal shape irregular. In the perception of the interviewed men, it is easier for women office bearers to talk about this with the concerned women than it would be for men.

Some men have critical remarks as well:

- 'How can a woman be a functionary as they cannot go out at night?'
- 'Women do not have the strength to do gate operating works'
- 'Women do not have time'
- 'I do not like women in WUA. If women become active they would dominate men'
- 'Women do not know about canal management and irrigation. Women have nothing to do in WUA.'

In women's views 'there is no work nowadays which can not be done by women.' The main thing is 'ability and interest to work'. Several women mention that education is needed to perform well in WUAs, and specific training in irrigation matters would make them feel surer in meetings. They also indicate that the contact between female farmers and female office bearers is easier than that between female farmers and male functionaries. But where men stress the need to change the misbehavior of female farmers, women stress the need for female farmers to contact office bearers to discuss their problems.

### **Impact of Affirmative Action**

For different groups of women the obligation to have one elected and one selected woman in Upatoli Committees worked out differently. Some women do not even know that there are now female members in the Upatoli Committee, neither do some men.

From interviews with female members in the Upatoli Committees it becomes clear that affirmative action creates possibilities for motivated, capable women to become active members of an Upatoli Committee, which otherwise wouldn't have been possible.

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<sup>5</sup> Based on 33 interviews, of which 3 were open interviews and 2 small group discussions.

Some women even 'grow' further in the organization after being selected as the female member. For example the lady who got a position as female member in the Regional Committee got later elected as chairperson of that same organization. She was competing with several men who also wanted that position.

Affirmative action also has its drawbacks. Affirmative action does not help if women are chosen in the Committee who are not motivated and do have little farming experience. And it is of course difficult for one woman to represent all the different women (caste, age, class) of her canal. From the interviews we know that the selected women normally have only very little contact with other women farmers of the same canal. Therefore the selected women do not represent other women of the canal. They feel more accountable to the person who provided them with this position than to other women using the same canal.

As mentioned by both men and women, female functionaries are easier to be contacted by female farmers. Female members of the Committees at the different levels in the WUA can facilitate that concerns of women farmers are taken up in the Committees. This will happen more easily if the rest of the Committee members are receptive to women's concerns. However this requires a change in attitude of men to be more gender sensitive. Men tend to underestimate the contribution in labor and decision making at family level of their wives, daughters and daughters in law in irrigated agriculture. This makes that they do not fully realize the stake women have in decision making at community level.

If women farmers are considered equal to male farmers, the performance of the irrigation system could improve as well. There is the example of a woman, whose husband migrated, who wanted to fulfill the maintenance obligation herself. Alternatives for her would be hiring labor to do her part of the canal maintenance (which is too expensive to her) or not to contribute at all and to risk a fine. This woman decided to do it herself. When she turned up to do her part of the maintenance she was laughed at by male farmers. Next year she might not come and her part of the canal won't be cleaned.

Female members in Committees and the Work Force have an exemplary role to show how women make a difference. The female members who are active in the Committees are very motivated and have a positive contribution to the WUA. These women show the stake women have in irrigated agriculture and perhaps slowly change the prevailing perception in which women's contribution are not taken fully into account.

### **Affirmative Action after IMTP**

After conclusion of the IMTP, the policy of affirmative action is continued by the WUA. There are several reasons for this:

- Still Technical Assistance (TA) is given: these officers have considerable influence on farmers as they have built up a long-term relationship. The TA officers emphasize

women's participation in WUA. They sometimes provide conditional services to the WUA.

- Male farmers can gain influence in Upatoli and other bodies in WUA if the female member is affiliated with their ideas. This support can help to keep influence in the Committees.
- The DOI still has a considerable stake in WUA policies for several reasons. DOI is still managing the headwork and it gives post transfer support to WUA, basically for O&M cost. The WUA has good reasons to keep warm relationships with DOI and follow the national policies, which include the provision that there should be at least 20% female users in all the executive units of the WUA.

## CONCLUSIVE NOTES

- Without positive action, in the form of making women membership in Upatoli Committee and Board of Directors compulsory, the entering of women in these groups is highly unlikely. If women are invited to participate, some will take the opportunity and become active members. By affirmative action women are given a chance to participate in decision making.
- So far only half of the rule in the constitution is implemented: of the compulsory one selected and one elected female member in the Upatoli Committee, only selected members took up a position. The elections of female members took never place. In the field people seem to be poorly informed about this part of the rule.
- Women who are active in irrigated agriculture and motivated to become member of WUA are more likely to be active office bearers. They are prepared to invest time and effort in the organization and they are well informed about the situation in the field.
- Support for selected women is necessary. They are normally less informed and feel more insecure than men. Female office bearers complain that they, more than men are excluded from information. Support from other Committee members can help them to get more acquainted with the tasks involved and to feel comfortable enough to speak out in public. External agencies can support elected (and other) women by giving them training in irrigation management and communications skills. Awareness raising among men about the stake women have in irrigated agriculture might create a more receptive environment for women as farmers and in Committees.
- Appointing women in Committees by the male local elite might only strengthen the power base of these male leaders. In that case female members do not represent other women, but are accountable to the male Committee members who appointed them. Appointing women by other Committee members blurs the transparency of the Upatoli and weakens its functioning.

- If all the stakeholders would elect a fixed number of women and men, both men and women have the same accountability to the farmers.
- If female members have to represent other women of the canal, then women should select female Committee members themselves.
- To increase further women's active participation in decision making, it should be made possible for women to become member of the WUA. Given the fact that many women do have a stake in water management as water users, membership of the WUA should be open for them. This implies that land ownership can not be a prerequisite for membership.
- If membership is open for women, all those who are interested and motivated can participate on their own behalf, without depending on male kin for information. As a consequence membership should be open for more members per household. This principle is already quite common and proven useful in forestry projects (Madhu Sarin, 1996).
- It should be realized that women do not feel invited by normal public announcements, either by the village *chaukidar*<sup>6</sup> or by notices in public places. If one aims to inform women about meetings and elections extra efforts are necessary to effectively reach women.

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<sup>6</sup> In this case a *chaukidar* is person responsible for dissemination of information.

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**Figure 1: Organizational Structure of West Gandak WUA**

