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HOUSEHOLD DECISION-MAKING
IN RURAL NEPAL: A STUDY OF
THE EFFECTS OF
GENDER ROLES AND ETHNICITY

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1999

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Applied Science in Rural Development at Massey University, New Zealand
ABSTRACT

Gender disparity in household decision-making is common in developing countries. Ethnicity, culture and geographical location also influence decision-making processes in rural communities. Household decision-making processes in central rural Nepal were examined with a primary focus on gender roles and involvement in the context of three distinct ethnic communities—Brahmin/Chhetri, Gurung and Tharu. Three Village Development Committees (VDCs) of the Chitwan district of Nepal were purposively selected for the study. A combination of participatory rural appraisal (n=6), gender analysis (n=6), key informant interviews (n=14) and household socio-economic surveys (n=123) was used to gather information and data for the study. At the household level, men and women were interviewed separately.

The results indicated that both men and women consistently carried out certain crop production activities. Other activities were either male or female dominated, but some activities were insensitive to gender and ethnicity. Ethnic variation impacted on gender roles and involvement of household members. For example, both males and females from the Brahmin/Chhetri and Gurung, and all family members from the Tharu, were involved in manure application to farmland. Fertiliser application was carried out by Brahmin/Chhetri and Tharu men, but jointly by the Gurungs. Crop harvesting was mostly completed by all household members, but with a low level of participation by men, and a high level of participation by women for all ethnic groups. Males dominated crop marketing in the Brahmin/Chhetri and Gurung communities, but this was jointly shared by the Tharus. Livestock-related work was primarily within the domain of women, but variation existed in gender roles across the ethnic groups. For example, Brahmin/Chhetri and Gurung men were less involved in grazing and fodder collection, but all members of Tharu households were jointly involved. Women were more involved than men in household management in all three ethnic groups, with the highest level of participation amongst the Tharu women.

Decisions were reached by household members through general discussion. In some cases, however, such as in the marketing of large ruminants, the decision was made solely by the men. Household decision-making also depended on the level and source of
income. Within the higher income Brahmin/Chhetri households decisions were largely made independently by males; for the lower income Gurung and the Tharu households joint decision-making was more common. Thus, the underlying male dominance in these communities tended to be related to income level. In relatively affluent households, women were largely restricted to household chores and were less involved in decision-making processes.

With respect to crop income, the Gurung women exercised control, whereas the Brahmin/Chhetri males, and both men and women for the Tharus, had a dominant influence over such income. For all ethnic groups, men overwhelmingly dominated the access to agricultural and veterinary services, community activities, and off-farm employment opportunities.

Rural and agricultural development activities in Nepal were shown not to be gender or ethnically neutral. However, the extent of this varies by activity. Thus, differences in gender and ethnic roles need to be specifically accounted for in rural policy formulation and planning. A pre-project analysis of gender and ethnicity involvement is recommended to provide better local knowledge of these factors before designing and implementing any project or developmental work.

Keywords: Household decision-making, gender roles, ethnicity, gender analysis, participatory rural appraisal, Nepal, rural development

Title: Household Decision-Making in Rural Nepal: A Study of the Effects of Gender Roles and Ethnicity.

Author: Durga Devkota, 1999.

Degree: Master of Applied Science (Rural Development).
In memory of my father,
Bhumi Nanda Parajulee,
who used to encourage for my higher study
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to the many people and institutions who helped in the completion of this thesis. They are too many to mention here individually: I wish I could express my sincere thanks to each and every one.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my Chief Supervisor, Dr Ganesh Rauniyar, for his excellent help and guidance in organising and arranging a Masters programme for me to pursue, directing my research, advising, guiding the statistical analyses and supporting this research. I am thankful to my co-supervisors, Dr Warren Parker, for his enthusiastic supervision and helpful advice on the manuscripts, and Dr Regina Scheyven, for her encouragement and guidance.

I would like to express special thanks to the people of Bhandara, Phulbari and Shivanagar VDCs of Chitwan, with whom co-operation this study would not have succeeded. I would also like to recognise the assistance of the enumerators in completing the field survey.

I am grateful to the New Zealand Official Development Assistance (NZODA) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade for the scholarship that allowed me to pursue my studies at Massey University. The research grant that I received from the Graduate Research Fund of Massey University is also highly appreciated.

The moral support and encouragement provided by the staff from the International Students' Office including Mrs Jo Donovan throughout the study period have been of tremendous value in completing my study.

I wish to extend my warmest gratitude to all postgraduate students and staff of the Institute of Natural Resources for providing an excellent environment which enabled me to complete my study successfully. I am also grateful to Mrs Denise Stewart for her assistance and encouragement at all times.
My warmest regards are due to Dr Durga Rauniyar, for her friendship and moral support in various forms. She has been a hard-working role model for me, from whom I drew encouragement. I am greatly indebted to Dr Shiva Gurung and his family for their friendship and support.

I owe an all-encompassing debt to my mother's love, encouragement and blessings—without which this study would not have been completed. In the way, I appreciate the great love and encouragement of my brothers; Ram, Ishwory, Megha, Krishna and Shankar, sisters-in-law, and sister, Tara, throughout my life. I would like to express many thanks to my parents-in-law and all family members for their love and support during my stay in New Zealand. I would also like to kindly acknowledge the help of my brothers-in-law; Ram Krishna, Bharat, Jana and sister-in-law, Sakun, for their help in different ways, while collecting data.

Last, but not the least, my immense appreciation goes to my beloved husband, Mr Naba Raj Devkota for his love, encouragement and companionship in various forms, without whose support I would not have been able to pursue my study in this beautiful country. He is an example of husband, father and friend which went beyond what I would have thought possible. It is my pleasure to acknowledge my son, Pramukh, for his great patience while I was away from him during my field research. I will always appreciate his patience, and understanding during my busy time. I love you, Pramukh, so much for your affection and wonderful support. It was my great pleasure to have our lovely daughter, Pratibha, arrive during the middle of my thesis work to join in our family: this was wonderful and added happiness and a "bundle of joy" to our home. I love you, Pratibha, very much.
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