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Intersectional Research for Women's Economic Empowerment Through Forest Solutions in Nepal

Srijana Baral and Kanchan Lama

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About the authors:

Srijana Baral, PhD, is a researcher and practitioner of gender equality, social inclusion and governance in forestry, climate change and natural resource management. She led the IDRC-funded Economic Empowerment of Women through Forest Solutions, among several action-research projects. She has published a wide range of research articles on inclusion and governance. Email: srijnabaral@gmail.com

Ms Kanchan Lama, a political scientist and a dedicated practitioner of gender equality and social inclusion, stands for transformative changes in human relationships for achieving sustainable development impacts. She has been contributing to gender explorative research and policy development in the natural resources sector, advocating for an intersectional approach to social justice. Email: kanchan.lama01@gmail.com

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Executive summary

Intersectionality, a term coined in 1989 by Kimberle Crenshaw, refers to the idea that multiple axes of social differentiation, such as gender, age, ethnicity or caste, and socioeconomic status, among others, intersect and co-constitute each other, resulting in unique social locations. In the Nepalese context, intersectionality goes beyond discussions of racial discrimination to encompass a broader perspective on the multidimensional marginalisation from and oppression within society, influenced by differences in caste, ethnicity, religion, well-being, marital status, sexual orientation and age group. The action research project entitled Economic Empowerment of Women through Forest Solutions was designed to better understand and address the multiple forms of discrimination faced by women in the context of forest-based enterprise development. The project's primary objective is to generate evidence-based knowledge that promotes women's economic empowerment through low carbon forest and nature-based entrepreneurial solutions that enhance women's resilience against climate change and Covid-19. In this case study report, we discuss how our project embraced an intersectional lens as well as the praxis that emerged from our targeted actions which aimed to economically empower these women, with a particular emphasis on using forestry as a means to achieve this empowerment.

Forests, which cover approximately 45% of Nepal's land, offer ample prospects for women to engage in accessible, stable and forest-based business, which contributes to the promotion of a low carbon economy. Yet many women, especially those belonging to Dalit caste (considered untouchables), ethnic communities, land less and land-poor women, women with disabilities and single and widowed women, face multiple challenges due to the inequitable distribution of rights, assets, resources and power within Nepalese society.

This action research project – funded by International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and led by ForestAction Nepal, in collaboration with The Himalayan Grassroots Women's Natural Resource Management Association (HIMAWANTI), Association of Family Forest Owners, Nepal (AFFON) and Federation of Forest-based Industry and Trade (FenFIT), Nepal – conducted research to gain insight into the oppression experienced by different groups of women and how these forms of oppression persist and exert dominance among women. To capture the diverse contexts of forest people-women relations, the project was implemented in two distinct regions: Sindhupalchok in the mid-hills and Nawalparasi (E) district in the lowlands. These areas exhibit variations in terms of agroforestry practices, ecological landscapes and socio-cultural groups, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play in different contexts.

The project had three prongs: an intersectional approach, a participatory action and learning (PAL) approach, and a women's economic empowerment (WEE) approach. The project understands intersectionality as a powerful concept to understand how an array of social factors and systems intersect to shape each person's experience. We believe that every person has multiple, intersectional identities, that can either confer

privilege or subject them to marginalisation. Our research adopted an intersectional lens at every stage of the research. This lens allowed us to analyze how multiple systems and ideologies of oppression intersect and operate cumulatively and concurrently to produce a specific experience of oppression among women entrepreneurs. We used participatory mapping, storytelling and games to facilitate ongoing learning and engagement throughout the research process, in addition to focus group discussions and ethnographic observation.

To acknowledge the diversity of experiences, we refrained from categorising all women or ethnic women into a universal category. Instead, we took steps to incorporate an intersectional approach into our research methodology and provided training to our project team on feminist approaches. This training equipped them with the tools to see how a broad categorisation such as women/ethnic women obscured the differences among them. Our project expanded its research scope beyond age, gender, caste and location to include considerations of women's marital status and household relationships. Given the increasing trend for male migration from Nepalese villages, the study unearthed significant insights from respondents regarding the ways in which marital status can positively or negatively impact their gender roles in development participation and benefit sharing. The situation of women's access to and control over productive assets at household level is still a complicated issue, influenced by a multitude of compounded factors, including interpersonal relationships, women's recognition, participation, benefit sharing and gender-based violence.

The project worked closely with indigenous and Dalit women forest users associated as users with the community forestry user groups (CFUG[1]). However, the community forest operational plans seldom address issues faced by marginalised forest-based Janajatis'[2] women's needs and interests. These can be their regular needs to harvest bamboo, Himalayan bamboo (*Drepanostachyum falcatum*), Sal (*Shorea robusta*) leaves, broom grass (Tiger grass), Thakal (*Phoenix loureiroi Kunth*) leaves and so on, which are usually the basis of their livelihood throughout the ye0ar. Women of these communities possess rich indigenous skills for processing herbs, wild edibles and so on, which are seldom regarded as valuable non-timber forest products (NTFPs). Unfortunately, these skills are frequently disregarded as economically unviable options. Even when women form a significant presence in CFUGs' governance, they are unaware about what kinds of intersectional needs and interests could be recognised, acknowledged and included in the planning process. In some cases, elite women in CFUG executive positions harass marginalised women and demonstrate a patriarchal masculine attitude. Hence, despite the increasing number of leadership roles held by women in CFUGs, there are certain areas marked by power dynamics that need to be addressed with an intersectional lens.

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[1] Community forest user groups are users of community forest who are legally recognised by the state to manage and conserve forest resources and put them to use.

[2] Indigenous people outside the Hindu caste system.

The project's findings underscore the pivotal role of recognising oppression and power dynamics in understanding the marginalisation experienced by women. Our adoption of an intersectional lens allowed us to understand the complex interplay of relationality, context and specific circumstances in shaping the marginalisation and oppression faced by women. Notably, we observed that women from similar ethnic backgrounds who heavily depended on forest resources experienced distinct forms of oppression. These differences were influenced by factors such as geographic location, migration status and proximity to market outlets. The intersection of these variables contributed to varying experiences of oppression among women with similar ethnic origins and reliance on forest resources.

Our goal was to enhance the recognition of women entrepreneurs in society and hold stakeholders accountable for their well-being. This commitment to recognition and accountability was embedded in our project from the initial proposal stage through to project implementation. To achieve greater recognition for women and their challenges, we focused on empowering families and women themselves. This involved raising self-awareness and fostering an understanding of the structural barriers that women face in a patriarchal society. The project also offered financial support and grants to women's enterprises and empowerment initiatives, built organisational awareness and conducted policy dialogues. Additionally, to enhance intersectional accountability, we carefully selected consortium partners who were sensitive to gender and intersectional issues. We chose to collaborate with CFUGs, and established coordination with local government bodies to ensure sustainability in promoting accountability for gender and social justice.

We conclude that adopting an intersectional approach is useful in understanding the various forms of oppression and injustice, and the complexities associated with addressing the multifaceted aspects of women's dominance. We consciously applied the different methodological tenets of intersectionality, including recognising oppression, context, complexity and relationality (as detailed in Misra et al., 2020). However, we did not isolate these tenets but instead considered them in relation to each other, allowing us to explore and discuss the unequal power relations. Among the different methods we adopted, we found the story-telling methodology to be particularly well-suited for gaining a deep understanding of women's issues and the ways in which these issues differed for different individuals and groups of women. However, this method did require more time investment than other methods. Moreover, the storytelling approach allowed for establishing a harmonious relationship between the researchers and the women involved in the study. This relationship was facilitated by shared language, the diverse age group of researchers, and frequent visits and discussions with the women. Furthermore, storytelling enabled a more complex exploration of women's experiences and challenges and ultimately enriched the depth of our research findings.

The case study confirms the usefulness of employing an intersectional approach in action research. This approach has proven effective in uncovering the nuanced realities of women's evolving roles, which are influenced by varying socio-economic and political forces, as well as interpersonal relationships within household decision-making processes. The study recommends the development of a gender-responsive

intersectional analytical framework. This framework would serve as a vital resource to support researchers delving deeper into the intersecting factors that impact women's differential positions and experiences in their journey towards advancement.

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Acronyms

AFFON	Association of Family Forest Owners, Nepal
CFOP	Community Forestry Operational Plan
CFUG	Community forest user groups
FenFIT	Federation of Forest-based Industry and Trade
FPE	Feminist political ecology
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
HIMAWANTI	Himalayan Grassroots Women's Natural Resource Management Association
NTFP	Non-timber forest products
PAL	Participatory action and learning
WEE-FS	Economic Empowerment of Women through Forest Solutions

Introduction

Gender inequalities have persisted for centuries in the history of humankind. Women have long faced gender based discrimination, and this discrimination becomes even worse in situations where women's identities intersect with factors such as race, class, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, age, marital status and other socially constructed identities. The term "Intersectionality" was first coined by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 and refers to the idea that multiple axes of social differentiation, such as gender, age, ethnicity or caste, and socioeconomic status, among others, intersect and co-constitute each other, resulting in unique social locations (Crenshaw, 1994). The concept emerged as a response to traditional feminist ideas and antiracist policies that excluded black women, who faced overlapping and unique forms of discrimination. Over time, intersectionality has evolved and expanded beyond the specific context of black women.

In the context of Nepal, intersectionality goes beyond discussions of racial discrimination to encompass a broader perspective that recognised oppression in society and societal subgroups to be influenced by differences in caste, ethnicity, religion, well-being, marital status, age group etc. In the absence of an intersectional approach, women are conceptualised as a unified group, rather than as diversified actors with differentiated interests and experiences (Elias et al., 2020). In many instances, women are considered synonymous with gender (Rocheleau et al., 1996), but not categorising all women or ethnic women into a universal category is especially important in a multi-cultured, multi-ethnic country such as Nepal. As systems of domination, oppression or discrimination intersect, their effects are compounded. This means that categorising individuals simply as "the poor" or "lower castes" or "women" under-estimates the disadvantages faced by those who belong to multiple disadvantaged groups (Nightingale, 2011). An intersectional approach targeted at one group may not adequately address discrimination and marginalisation experienced by all other groups. In Nepal, for example, women belonging to lower castes, and particularly Dalit women (whose caste is considered untouchable, though untouchability is legally abolished in Nepal[3]), are one of the most vulnerable groups because of the intersection of their caste and gender. This makes them extremely susceptible to violence and exploitation in Nepal (Joshi & Kharel, 2008).

The action research project entitled Economic Empowerment of Women through Forest Solutions (WEE-FS) was designed to better understand and address the multiple forms of discrimination faced by women in the context of forest-based enterprise development. Many women, especially indigenous women, those belonging to Dalit caste (considered untouchable), ethnic communities, landless and land-poor women, women with disabilities and single and widowed women face multiple challenges due to the inequitable

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[3] Nepal was declared an untouchability and discrimination free country on 4 June 2006. On 24 May 2011, Nepal enacted a law criminalising caste-based discrimination. The Constitution of Nepal 2015 also has provisions against discrimination. Article 24 (1) states that no person shall be subjected to any form of untouchability or discrimination in any private and public place on grounds of his or her origin, caste, tribe, community, profession, occupation or physical condition.

distribution of rights, assets, resources and power in Nepalese society. Our research adopted an intersectional approach to understand how the forms of oppression differ amongst women and how these forms of oppression perpetuate the domination faced by different groups of women. Forests, which cover approximately 45% of Nepal's land, offer ample prospects for women to engage in accessible, stable and forest-based business which contributes to the promotion of a low carbon economy.

To capture the diverse relational dimensions in forest people-women relations, the WEE-FS project is being implemented in Sindhupalchok and Nawalparasi (E) district of Nepal. These two districts are different in certain aspects of their agroforestry and ecological landscape, as well as in sociocultural aspects. Nawalparasi is located on a plain whereas Sindhupalchok is in the mid-hill area. The project adopted an intersectional approach to understand how diverse factors – such as age, caste/ethnicity, religion, marital status, widowhood, literacy level, economic status, political status, physical disability and geographical location – intersect to shape women's access to and control of forest-based enterprises.

Overview of research project

The case study draws upon the experiences and lessons gained from our intervention methodologies which aimed to empower women in economic roles by engaging them in forest-based enterprise development. The methodologies were implemented as part of the WEE-FS project. This is an action research project funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and led by ForestAction Nepal in collaboration with The Himalayan Grassroots Women's Natural Resource Management Association (HIMAWANTI), Association of Family Forest Owners, Nepal (AFFON), and Federation of Forest-based Industry and Trade (FenFIT), Nepal.

WEE-FS has four specific objectives: (i) to understand the constraints and opportunities for women's economic empowerment in a forested landscape in Nepal by undertaking gender and intersectional analyses of policies, institutions and practices in the forestry sector; (ii) to generate innovative approaches and strategies that increase and sustain women's income and economic resources through enhanced collective agency, entrepreneurial capacities and transformative power relations; (iii) to develop and pilot inclusive models of sustainable, low-carbon, nature-based solutions through forest management and forest-based businesses; (iv) and to contribute to an enabling policy and institutional environment that supports women-led forest management, trade and enterprises and communicates knowledge products to wider stakeholder and epistemic communities.

The project integrated an intersectional approach throughout the project cycle, beginning with the baseline survey following the project conceptual framing and actions delivery. The project design identified the need for empowering specific sub-groups of women in their socio-economic rights by engaging them in forest-based enterprises, with the aim of enabling these women to achieve a status equal to men in decision-making regarding productive resources. The project conceptualised a three-prong intervention approach to

materialise an inclusive approach to empower the women facing compounded discrimination in their socio-economic and political rights. As mentioned already, the three prongs included the following:

An Inter-sectional approach was embraced to understand the intersecting and compounding factors experienced by the categorised sub-groups of women regarding their access to resources and services within the governance structure of CFUG. This focus was instrumental in identifying the specific groups of women who would be the primary beneficiates or target groups as described in the project documents mentioned above. Thus, the project's targeting approach for participants remained purposive. While conducting the project baseline, intersectional variables were integrated into the design survey tools, including the semi structured questionnaires. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were implemented to explore, document, and validate the contextual factors contributing to the exclusion of the women participants from the mainstream development of forest-based enterprises.

A participatory action and learning (PAL) approach was employed with an intersectional feminist lens to create an environment that enabled marginalised women to openly voice the structural barriers they faced in accessing forest resources to engage in forest-based enterprise development. These barriers include the discouraging attitude of forestry staff, CFUG executives, local government entities and even their own family members. Through the PAL approach, the project staff not only identified the compounded intersectional factors but also empowered the participants to map and reflect on the various layers of implicit elements of discrimination, including sociocultural and geographical issues, that affect their civil identities and membership in the CFUGs, and eventually lead to their exclusion from registration and participation in development activities. PAL was instrumental in raising self-awareness among the women participants, especially those from intersectional marginalised women's groups. This self-awareness led to empowerment, as these women eventually raised their collective voice to advocate for equitable distribution of forest resources and services. They influenced the local government and the forest authority to consider these groups under a special policy consideration. Nonetheless, women's economic empowerment was a critical factor in such social empowerment and collective action.

A women's economic rights approach was central to this project's methodology and overall goal of identifying and removing structural barriers that hinder women's access to, and control over, resources and opportunities at all levels (household, community and political). The project staff facilitated a process where different women could reflect on the structural barriers, shaped by intersectional factors, that limited their participation in forest-based enterprises. Lack of information, appropriate training and technologies, time for participation in training due to their wage-work based livelihood and awareness of women's economic rights were found to be common factors for marginalisation of the targeted women. Nonetheless, certain specific factors, such as being a single woman, a young widow or a Dalit single women, create even more challenges and conflicting situations when it comes to women making money from the market. They often find themselves being the sole bread earner, bearing all the household expenses as well, when living in extended

families, being much more obliged to hand over their earnings to other family members. Conversely, women with husbands often felt privileged to claim their rights to their income, as they view their role as supplementary to their male partner's earnings. Through the project and a focus on economic empowerment through gender analysis in resource sharing, the majority of women participants have begun to recognise the need for women's collectives and have begun women's savings groups.

The three pronged approach helped us to understand the stories of oppression and inequalities. A feminist perspective was critical. Using women's economic empowerment as the entry point, the project employed an intersectional approach to assess the intersecting factors and sub-groups of women who face compounding forms of discrimination, including gender based violence.

The research methodology centred and emphasised women's economic rights, with the goal of removing the structural barriers that hinder women's access to and control over resources. Additionally, a PAL approach, infused with a feminist lens, was employed to understand power dynamics between the project team and targeted stakeholders, and as a conscious strategy to mitigate unequal power relationships and risks through critical reflexivity and consciousness at every stage of the project. In this case study report, we focus on our project's embrace of an intersectional lens as well as the praxis that emerged through our targeted actions which aimed to economically empower women.

The project's understanding of intersectionality

The intersection of gender, caste, class, religion and age, challenging the conception of "casteless gender" and "genderless caste" is commonly discussed in Nepal and India (Nightingale, 2011). The Economic Empowerment of Women through Forest Solutions project understands that intersectionality is a powerful concept to consider how an array of social factors and systems intersect to shape each person's experience. Incorporating an intersectional lens enriches a researcher's understanding of the social world (Misra et al., 2020). We believe that every person has multiple intersectional identities, and that these intersecting identities can lead to prestige for some and marginalise others. Therefore, work to prevent gender-based inequality cannot be carried out in isolation from work to address other forms of discrimination.

The project applied an intersectional lens during its baseline survey to identify women with compounded discrimination. Through this process, it became evident that intersectionality issues are personal and operate at the individual level. Thus, the project acknowledges that women are not a homogenous group, and that interventions must be responsive to the specific needs and interests of various sub-groups of women. Nonetheless, structural barriers persist for women, especially those from the Janajati and Dalit castes, who continue to remain intellectually dominated, invisible and unheard. Importantly, Janajati and Dalit women, as

well as marginalised forest-based communities, are yet to benefit from the community forests[4] in terms of equitable benefit sharing or access to livelihood resources, public services and government's regular programs. Many Janajati and Dalit women are yet to establish and renew their community forest user group (CFUG) membership, which is the mandatory requirement for accessing forest resources and services. Furthermore, the Community Forest Operational Plans (CFOP) seldom address issues of the marginalised forest-based women and Janajatis' needs and interests. These can be their regular need to harvest bamboos, Himalayan bamboo (*Drepanostachyum falcatum*), leaves of Sal (*Shorea robusta*), broom grass (Tiger grass), Thakal (*Phoenix loureiroi* Kunth) leaves and so on, which are usually the basis of their livelihood source throughout the year. These communities possess rich indigenous skills for processing herbs, wild edibles and so on, which are seldom regarded as valuable non-timber forest products (NTFPs). Unfortunately, these skills are frequently neglected as uneconomic options. Even when women form a significant presence in CFUGs' governance, they are unaware of what kinds of intersectional needs and interests could be recognised, acknowledged and proposed for inclusion in the community forestry planning process through preparation of CFOPs[5]. Hence, despite the increasing leadership roles of women in CFUGs, there are certain issues which need to be addressed through an **intersectional lens**. Thus, in the project we first sought answers to the following questions:

- Which women are represented in CFUGs benefits? And who is excluded? What are the reasons behind the exclusion of certain groups of women?

- Are the policies that ensure 37.5% of the CFUG's income for women's advancement appropriate to ensure women entrepreneurship through forest resources?

- How does the CFUG address the exclusion of resource poor, indigenous women and their ability to raise their issues of displacement from their cultural lifestyle, by introducing barriers against their access to and control over NTFPs?

The project justified the adoption of an intersectional approach by acknowledging the complex and compounded discriminations faced by women from specific sub-groups. It argued for the necessity of an intersectional approach when selecting the project's target for participants in enterprise development. The project's design identified the need to empower such sub groups of women in their socio-economic roles, mainly by creating sustainable access to forest resources and household and community level economic decision making, as well as influencing the appropriate agencies for policy reform to favor women-friendly

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[4] Community forests are the patches of government forest handed over to local communities to manage for their own use and benefits, based on the CFOP approved by the Divisional Forest Officer, a representative of the provincial government.

[5] A CFOP is an inventory based work plan for a community forest user group which contains management prescriptions, including harvesting the forest products intended for sustainable forest management. It is the mandatory requirement for formal handover of a part of national forest to a user group.

resource distribution. Thus the project adopted an intersectional approach in a women's empowerment framework, by facilitating an enabling environment and agency building among women to help them reflect on their sociopolitical conditions and explain their discriminated status under patriarchal values. For example, in Nepal, even a highly educated Dalit woman may hesitate to enter a Brahmin kitchen under the threat of a dominating feudal culture of caste-based hierarchy. Although the women in the project sites face lesser discriminants due to being a migrated mixed community of indigenous peoples and Dalits, there remained an implicit form of social exclusion of Dalits from performing religious rituals. In such a context, the project adopted a women's empowerment framework to develop individual and collective agency, empowering women to overcome their hesitation to speak up and voice their concerns.

Intersectionality and Research Design

Integrating Intersectionality in the Feminist Political Ecological framework

In our research we adopted a broad framework of feminist political ecology (FPE), which has been intertwined with intersectionality in the academic arena. The framework allowed us to analyze how gender intersects with other social categories and structural power dynamics to create differential access to and control over natural resources (Ahlborg & Nightingale, 2017; Nightingale, 2017). However, there are differences between the two concepts. Intersectional researchers consider how race, gender, class, sexuality, nationality and other socially constructed dimensions of difference are always interacting (Misra et al., 2020). This framework allows examination of the interlocking power differences and normative structures that result in the invisibility and oppression of certain social categories and relations as regards gender, ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, age, ability and other identities (Ahlborg & Nightingale, 2017). Feminist political ecology treats gender as a critical variable in shaping women's access to and control over resource. It emphasises how these dynamics are contested through cultural and societal norms (Kabeer, 2011). FPE also refines the concept of marginalisation by highlighting how the least powerful groups are vulnerable to socio-environmental changes (Collins, 2008).

Rocheleau et al. (1996) laid out what they saw as the three key themes to emerge from feminist theorising on gender and environment and recent political-ecology work: first, gendered knowledge, or the ways in which access to scientific and ecological knowledge is structured by gender; second, gendered environmental rights and responsibilities, including differential access for men and women to various legal and de facto claims to land and resources; and third, gendered politics and grassroots activism, including an examination of women within and as leaders of environmental movements. FPE takes gender research in natural resource management a step further, beyond examining differences in participation and benefits for women and men in collective farming. Rather, FPE examines the contradictions and struggles over access to and control over resources (Elmhirst, 2011).

Theoretically, this paper extends FPE's engagement with governance by addressing how the interplay of sociocultural norms, community micropolitics, spatiality of bodies and unequal power relations lead to gendered outcomes. The project conducted a gender and intersectional assessment of existing policies, institutions and on-the ground practices to map out opportunities and gaps for increasing women's empowerment in the forestry sector. Thus, we trace how intersectionality in practice draws attention to hidden knowledge and experience, challenges discriminatory labels and requires careful navigation between individual and group processes. In our case, we see intersectionality as a process that highlights the relational nature of power by observing the interactions among different intersecting variables of oppression that persist in society at different scales, rather than an all-encompassing force shaping entire social systems (Choo & Ferree, 2010). Hence, using an intersectional feminist perspective allowed us to gain insights from women's efforts to claim agency without discounting the importance of broader structural forces that shape their positions (Pandya, 2022). This study revealed that adopting intersectionality was a feminine task that was full of empathy and compassion, and made us realise that the world is always more complicated and contradictory than we ever could have anticipated (Davis, 2008).

An intersectional problem statement

Patriarchy is still rampant in society, granting men societal privileges while women face discriminatory pressures. This discrimination intensifies when gender is intersected by caste, ethnicity, age, educational background, geography and so on. The patriarchal nature of Nepali society dictates discriminatory socio-cultural norms and legal and institutional structures that restrict women's rights, resources and opportunities. This creates barriers to women's economic empowerment and climate resilience. Climate change has posed challenges to rural livelihoods, with differential impacts on women and men, further exacerbating women's vulnerability. Women play a pivotal role in forest conservation, yet they are marginalised and excluded from exercising their rights and enjoying the benefits of forest management. This exclusion disproportionately affects women from forest-dependent local communities, indigenous groups, Dalits groups, land-poor and landless groups, and single and widowed women.

To address these issues, the project adopted a women's economic empowerment framework that aims to build women's agency by addressing masculinist systemic barriers to ensure leadership in forest governance's decision making roles. While the government of Nepal has introduced affirmative policies for women and women in businesses, these structural barriers continue to hinder women's access to and control over income and employment opportunities in the forestry sector, all of which are compounded by masculinist norms in decision-making processes (Bhattarai, 2020; Khadka, 2010). In situations where the government and local institutions allocate quotas for women, it is often the same elite women represented, while others continue to be marginalised. We used an intersectional lens to understand the reasons for the inclusion of some women and the exclusion of others.

Initially, the project team had a limited understanding of intersectionality, with a focus on caste-based discrimination faced by women in Nepal. This discrimination becomes even more severe when a woman belongs to the Dalit caste. The project team initially aimed to include women from marginalised ethnic communities and Dalits as project beneficiaries. But, after conducting the scoping visits to the project sites, and discussions with the women groups, we realised that the oppression multiplies when the women is poor, landless, widowed, a woman with disability, a senior women or a woman having only daughters. This recognition led to the realisation that a focus on gendered intersectionality is required to address the multiple forms of oppressions and inequality that persist in Nepalese communities. Moreover, there seems to be a lack of knowledge in institutional affairs as well as research data and developmental schemes related to women's engagement in forestry businesses, on both the policy and academic front (Aryal et al., 2020).

Intersectionality and Methodological Practices

Methodological tenets

Our research adopted an intersectional lens at every stage of the research to analyses how multiple ideologies of oppression operate cumulatively and concurrently to produce a specific experience of oppression among women entrepreneurs. We considered the different tenets of intersectionality in our research. Collins and Billge (2016) present six aspects of intersectionality, including inequality, relationally, power, social context, complexity and social justice. Meanwhile, Misra et al. (2020) integrate the concepts of inequality, power and social justice into their concept of oppression. They illustrate how oppression is intricately linked to the concept of relationality, demonstrating how privilege and disadvantage are interconnected. Furthermore, both Collins and Billge (2016) emphasise the importance of complexity and context within an intersectional approach. Additionally, Misra et al. (2020) devise new tenets, such as comparison and deconstruction. In our research we have adopted oppression as a central tenet which recognises the relationship between power and inequality, with inequality stemming from unequal power relations and dominance. However, these tenets, as discussed below, are interconnected when studying the marginalisation of women through an intersectional approach.

Oppression

The recognition of oppression and power are central to understanding the marginalisation of women. Recognising situated oppression lies at the heart of intersectional methodology, revealing that power operates in uneven and differentiated ways (Misra et al., 2020). In addition, in comparing the oppression/dominance among women based on caste, ethnicity, age, marital status, land holding and well-being demonstrates the relationality and complexity women face both in society and households. The geographic context in which women entrepreneurs operate also played a significant role in relational dominance and oppression.

Throughout the research, we also encountered various issues that reflected the complexity of women's socially constructed positionalities and the profound impact of historical and social context on their lives.

Relationality, context and complexity

Collins (2008) argues that everyone fits into a complex "matrix of domination" formed through the structural practices and policies, disciplinary processes and hegemonic ideologies of everyday lived experiences. Thus relationality of a woman is compounded by complex social inequality.

The recognition of complexity, context and relationality is essential for gaining a comprehensive understanding of how oppression operates in the lives of marginalised women. We observed that women from similar ethnic backgrounds who heavily depended on forest resources experienced distinct forms of oppression. These differences were influenced by factors such as geographic location, migration status and proximity to market outlets. For example, the Bhujel[6] women from Nawalparasi faced different forms of discrimination compared to Thami[7] women from Latu, Sindhupalchok, despite both depending on bamboo or Himalayan bamboo based enterprises. The Bhujel women are landless and have migrated from hills to low lands for political reasons. Due to lack of land access, the local elites consider them to be land poachers and illegal traders. The Thami women have greater confidence and influenced the local government's development priorities. Interestingly, despite Bhujel women lacking access to land, they have access to markets and have higher income than Thami women. These nuanced differences in the oppression faced by women from the same ethnic origin underscore the importance of complexity and relationality when embracing an intersectional approach. By adopting an intersectional approach, we were able to recognise and understand these variations, which might have been overlooked if women were categorised under a universal category of women/ethnic women.

Apart from differences in marginalisation shaped by women's limited access to resources, markets and technology has affected women's status, the population living in the mixed community and the ones who have not migrated. In many instances, a woman feels much more obliged to obey all the socially dictated discriminatory norms in her locality and among her own kith and kin. We came across some such cases, such as the young married Dalit woman from Namuna CFUG who shared that once she migrated to the area from her former village, she felt welcomed and respected as having a status equal to other women of the village.

Methodological practices for understanding women's forest-sector marginalisation

This section focuses specifically on the data collection methods employed during the implementation of participatory action research (PAR). PAR is an appropriate methodological approach because it offers

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[6] Bhujel is an ethnic caste group in Nepal.

[7] Thami are indigenous tribal groups in Nepal.

opportunities to involve participants as researchers in the exploration of their own issues and concerns (Wheeler et al., 2020). We used participatory mapping, storytelling and games to facilitate ongoing learning and engagement throughout the research process, in addition to focus group discussions, and ethnographic observation. We now discuss each of these methodological practices.

Participatory mapping

The use of participatory mapping of resources is based on the assumption that local communities possess valuable knowledge about the resources in their area. The coproduction of the resource maps sees community members as active participants, which not only yields more accurate and contextually relevant resource maps but also fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among community members regarding their natural resources (Saija & Pappalardo, 2018). For the mapping exercise, carried out at three case study sites, we invited at least ten women from each CFUG. The women drew a map of their village, including the forest, settlement and major infrastructure. Then, to access their knowledge on the resources, and their access to the resources, the women identified their areas of interest and access. For example, the mapping exercise showed that young, often single, women's access to resources was inferior compared to older and married women's. Younger women expressed not feeling safe when entering deep into the forest, which limited their involvement in resource collection. In contrast, older women dedicated more time to collecting forest products, while the younger women spent more time selling products. Hence, through participatory mapping, women were able to visualise their existing resource context.

In order to understand the hidden power dynamics, we proposed a game of naming the people with whom women must interact, can interact, and feel unsafe interacting during a focus group discussion. The game began with recalling a person whom they had asked about a market place for their bamboo baskets and trays, the forest guards they had interacted with when entering the forest area, or the fruit shop keepers at the entrance to the Dhodeni area to whom they sell their bundles of Sal leaves (*Shorea robusta*) and other retailers to whom they sell other forest harvests. This game revealed that none of the women present was acquainted with people with political power, such as the ward chairperson and the ward members.

We could trace Bhujel women's mobility and freedom during a participatory mapping exercise in the Bhujel village. None of the participant women, including the young girls, except one, had gone to school. The Bhujels accept that education is meant for certain elite class people, not for them. Just recently the district Rotary Club has constructed a school building for the kids here which is run privately by one female teacher. In such a condition, with a belief that the women and girls might bring out their real issues of compounded forms of discriminations, we encouraged one young woman under 16 years of age, to begin playing the marker on the flip chart to draw their village map with all the resources around. After fifteen minutes of struggling efforts, all the women – the elderly and younger – began to share their ideas about the resource location, related mobility for harvesting purposes, and their struggle with some forest guards who they occasionally encounter

during their NTFP harvesting. Experiences of the young women from those of the elderly ones. While the elderly women had less fear inside the forest, the younger girls expressed:

> We young ones are at risk, due to our facing with some men occasionally besides wild animals. We are afraid of getting sexually abused, at times. That is why we seldom travel to the far stay close to the village and thus cannot harvest sufficient NTFPs for sale.

The elderly women shared that they do harvest much more than the young women due to their privileged marital status. During the discussion, the women concentrated more on the areas of bamboo collection and hence proved their implicit desire to get bamboo near to their homesteads.

Storytelling and oral histories

Story telling was another important participatory method in this project. Story telling allows experiences to emerge and be shaped through a process of listening, reflection and creative expression (Wheeler et al., 2020). We adopted this method as it is widely recognised to be empowering, providing women and girls with the opportunities to strengthen their voices and agency (Misra et al., 2020). In our case, the story telling was combined with oral histories to allow women to express wider narratives of exclusion from access to, and control over, resources. The storytelling process was iterative and innovative, giving each woman the chance to personally convey her tale. After we shared our experiences, the women's groups felt comfortable sharing theirs. Gender-based violence, chances for women to engage in economic activity, and their share of domestic management responsibilities were the beginning points. Story-telling allowed us to value different forms of knowledge and make space for the emotions and experiences of intersecting inequalities to be expressed and heard, while also ensuring confidentiality during the process.

In one of the women's community forest user groups, we organised a discussion for storytelling that brought together women from diverse backgrounds, including women from the Dalit community, those with husbands living with a disability, a young Dalit woman who migrated from the hills to the lowlands, widows from ethnic communities, advantaged women and those living with their in-laws. The purpose of the session was for women to map their varied experiences, including both differences and commonalities in facing social discrimination and injustices. The stories were varied. Young women and women from advantaged communities who were in different social positions (such as community forest user groups, drinking water groups, irrigation user groups and mothers' groups) were more confident and shared their stories without hesitation compared to an elderly Dalit women who was more often quiet and shy and had some discomfort with sharing her stories. To comfort her, we first talked about her children. In the Nepalese community, women are fascinated by talking about their children. After a while she was more comfortable with discussing her experience. The women shared that she was involved in the business of making local alcohol and could earn only Rs3000/month. Neither the investment in collecting firewood or people's perception towards this work was prestigious. But after she was targeted as a project beneficiary, she was trained to develop

entrepreneurship and gained skill weaving Thakal handicrafts. The income from the Thakal was greater than the income from making alcohol, and she has also gained the respect of people in her community. People once called her *timi* (a less respectful word for an elder women). However, the CFUG people have started addressing her as *tapai* (a preferred and more respectful word for an elderly woman) which has brought her a sense of honour and recognition.

Ethnographic observation

Ethnographic observation was vital to our research and project interventions, focusing on women's empowerment.

Each individual researcher involved in the action research project was assigned to submit a field report based on their observations upon returning from the field work. The researchers employed two approaches. First, we observed women entrepreneurs' expressions and actions. For instance, we observe that when Dalit women groups in Amarjyoti CFUG were provided with a machine to produce bio-cups and plates, they could save time and engage peacefully in their family work too. Second, we actively participated in actions with women groups. For example, our researchers participated in plucking the bamboo clumps for planation in Bhujel village where we observed how the needy women were eager to help and ensure survival of the planted bamboo. Employing a reflexive process was essential for us to understand and examine how our own positionality and assumptions influence our research practice and observations. Intersectional reflexivity was particularly imperative given our focus on women's economic empowerment and the implications of class/caste and ethnicity matters on engaging with women groups.

Focus group discussions

Focus group discussions were carried out in Namuna CFUG with mixed group, single and widow women and Bhujel village (one with an ethnic landless community) and Latu (an ethnic community who are geographically distant but has land ownership) and Amarjyoti CFUG (Dalit women).

Mixed group discussion with Namuna CFUG: A mixed-caste ethnic group of indigenous women, aged 25 to 45, participated in a focus group discussion within Namuna CFUG. The primary ethnic group represented was Magar, followed by Gurung and Dalit, with a small number of Chhetri women. This focus group discussion aimed to deepen insights into the multifaceted factors influencing relationships among women, including age, education, geography and political affiliation.

Since the group was a mixed and migrated community, there was less women-to-women discrimination. The Dalit woman who had migrated from the hills shared how she identified herself as "free" and "equal" compared to in her original home village, where she had to live a socially discriminated life under a Brahmin-dominated community. But she has found an open and welcoming society in this Namuna CFUG context. Otherwise, as she shared, "I would not have been included in skill training along with other caste groups." In Nepalese societies, caste discrimination still prevails and creates walls between women from different social

categories. Consequently, she still grapples with the gender and caste discriminations in her previous community all the time.

Focus group discussion with the landless indigenous women in Bhujel village: Another focus group, with landless indigenous women between the ages of 18 and 65, was held in Bhujel village. Bhujel village is located within a community forestry area which is home to a population belonging to all caste groups. The land is owned by the government but the management is with the CFUG.

The women in this village rely entirely on forest resources for their livelihoods, including leaves, wild edibles, medicinal herbs, and dry twigs and branches. They live under the constant threat of being labeled as leading an "illegal" lifestyle, which perpetually leaves them feeling subordinate and hesitant to speak openly in public gatherings. They rarely discuss their livelihood concerns, fearing exposure of their informal harvesting of forest products. Nonetheless, weaving bamboo baskets and trays is a primary handicraft skill among the women in this community, with each family member possessing this traditional knowledge, although they may consider themselves inferior in acquiring it.

Further focus group discussions were conducted in Bhujel village to compare their status with the Thami community, who are indigenous but own their own land in Sindhupalchok district. During the focus group discussion held with women, men, youths, and children, we used participatory mapping exercises to map the forest resources and access patterns of women and men to these resources, to see how women from various family backgrounds might respond when confronted with intersectional dimensions within power relationships.

Focus group discussion with indigenous Thami women with landholding in Lattu village: A focus group in Lattu, with indigenous women with landholdings, was in one of the remotest areas in Sindhupalchok district.

In this village, the indigenous Thami ethnicity is dominant and faces endangerment. These women possess basic literacy skills and some legal land ownership, although 90% of the land is owned by men, leaving only 10% in the hands of women. Their primary source of livelihood is agriculture, including agroforestry such as cardamom cultivation. However, a significant and consistent income for them, beyond meeting basic agricultural needs, comes from year-round bamboo basket weaving to sell in the construction sector. In the focus group discussion, we wanted to explore relationships between women acting as intermediaries in marketing and the producer women, as well as the dynamics between politically influential women and others. Our research methods included storytelling and observation for validation.

In this focus group discussion, we found that the women were divided into two groups under the influence of political partisan agendas. The conflict emerged between two women political leaders who came up with two different proposals for selecting the location of the building to produce the bamboo product. This division was so strong that it also led to a split among women entrepreneurs under their respective partisan influences.

This not only could cause a delay in project activities, but also created barriers to the women expressing their choices. The project team had not been aware of these internal issues in the community before. This underscores how intersectional issues can harm women's advancement, even when driven by external and politically divided hidden agendas, sometimes involving women against women.

Intersectional Praxis for Policy and Social Change

The concept of intersectionality has its roots in critical praxis (in social movements of black feminists in 1960s and 1970s) that challenged social inequalities. According to Townsend-Bell (2009), "intersectional praxis" rests on two requirements: intersectional recognition, or attention to the role of difference in terms of acknowledgement and analysis; and a politics of accountability, or a commitment to aid in the eradication of oppressive relations. In our project we define praxis widely to encompass research dissemination and engagement in partnership and movement building, and policy uptake and application to enhance women entrepreneurs' recognition in society. In this section we discuss these two elements of intersectional praxis that developed through our actions that aim to economically empower women.

Intersectional recognition

Our commitment to intersectional recognition was embedded in our project from the initial proposal stage through to project implementation. Here we discuss four strategies of recognition to minimise the oppression of and injustice against women entrepreneurs in the forestry sector in Nepal.

Capacitating the families and women

Since we identified household relations between family members, especially the husband and wife, and women's relationships with in-laws as hindering women's entrepreneurial journey, we realised that capacitating women alone was inadequate. Thus, we began organising couple trainings in all our research sites which were attended by women's husbands and, if they were absent, women's mothers-in-law. The training aimed to ensure that everyone within the family system comprehended the structural barriers women encounter in a patriarchal society.

Gender responsive and intersectional methodology

We reviewed the research methodology to integrate an intersectional approach, incorporating methods such as storytelling and ethnography to gain insights into the challenges faced by marginalised women. Additionally, the project team underwent training in feminist approaches to enable them to explore women's issues more profoundly through an intersectional lens.

Providing funds or grants to the women

The women entrepreneurs were identified using an intersectional lens, meaning the entrepreneurs were typically marginalised, voiceless and economically disadvantaged. The project then started supporting these women by providing capacity building and exposure visits, and also supporting women entrepreneurs to construct homes. We also provided technology tailored to the needs of these women. The Dalit women group who received a machine to produce bio-cups and plates from the project has expanded their market by using TikTok and Facebook. "Now we are called entrepreneurs and we are even felicitated by other organisations to motivate the women", said a Brahmin respondent. Furthermore, the local government and government's micro enterprise promotion institution have started supporting these women to reduce the power gap between women and society and between women from different communities.

Policy dialogues

Policy dialogues were designed to ensure that women entrepreneurs' voices are heard in an external space, prompting dialogue with the wider community, external stakeholders and policy makers. Two policy dialogues were organised for women entrepreneurs to discuss the policy challenges they face with local government and policy implementers, including the Divisional Forest Officer, Small and Cottage Industries officials, and financial institutions. These dialogues allowed women entrepreneurs to request services from the institutions and people responsible for delivering them. Women entrepreneurs, comprising of all ethnic women's groups, have managed to leverage resources from the local government, community forest user groups and the project. For example, the nine group of women got a women entrepreneur's building constructed in six different locations of Nawalparasi and Sindhupalchok for sustainable business operations. But the same building construction has been an issue in mixed communities such as Sundari CFUG, Nawalpur district, owing, at least in part, to the absence of support from elite women in the executive committee. Thus inviting elite women to the policy dialogue event, where women shared their issues and insisted that men and the elite women changed their minds, has seen some positive change.

Enhancing intersectional accountability

A commitment to intersectional accountability was also embedded in our project from the initial proposal stage through to project implementation. Here we discuss three ways we have sought to create alliances to hold stakeholders accountable and eradicate the varied forms of marginalisation and oppression women face in the forestry sector.

Identifying and selecting consortium partners

The project leverages the existing trust and relationships of ForestAction and its partners, including HIMAWANTI, AFFON and FenFiT, to link the evidence-based knowledge generated by this project with actions to facilitate and negotiate women's secured rights to economic empowerment. ForestAction Nepal has an

established track record of action based evidence to resolve policy issues in the forestry sector, linking forest management with gender and governance. ForestAction's partners bring complementary strengths and expertise. For example, HIMAWANTI, a network of grassroots women leaders, has a track record of advocating for women's rights to natural resources and a more equitable distribution of benefits accruing from them. AFFON, a national association established to secure the rights of individuals and groups who rely on Family Forests for their livelihood, have experience in the policy formulation process. FenFiT, a forestry business association, is well-placed to promote a transparent, fair and competitive business environment in forestry. These consortium partners are policy champions and contribute to shaping legal and regulatory provisions in favor of women run forest-based business. Thus, the consortium is constructed in such a way that ForestAction is an academic leader and HIMAWANTI, AFFON and FenFIT are the end users of the project's learning.

The choice to work with CFUGs

The CFUGs are autonomous institutions who are legally assigned to manage, conserve and use forest resources. Most of the accessible forest resources are already controlled by the users in the form of community forestry. Given that the project's primary aim is to economically empower women through forestry solutions, the existing CFUGs are a critical institutional structure at the local level for forestry interventions (Giri et al., 2008). The CFUG policies require a highly participatory governance-structure. The CFUG governance system initially mandated 33% women's participation, 35% benefit sharing by women and the deprived, and 20% Dalit participation, which was successful for involving these groups in the CFUG executive committees. Today, the CFUG executive committee mandates 50% women's participation, and proportional allocation of seats for indigenous people (Janajati) and Dalits, which pushed up women's visibility and inclusion in CFUG (GoN, 2009).

Coordination with local government

The project formulated a Women Leadership Circle which is led by a deputy mayor (a woman in our case) and other stakeholders at the local government level in Devchuli, Gaidakot and Barhabise Municipality and in Tripura Sundari Rural Municipality. The circle was formed with the aim of advancing policies for women leadership and empowerment and mainstreaming women's issues in the local government's planning process, with the ultimate goal of gender justice. During our project scoping visit, stakeholders suggested ignoring Bhujel women because they were said to be drunk the whole day and engaged in illegally harvesting forest products. However, after a project intervention was carried out in coordination and consultation with these stakeholders, the Bhujel women are at the centre of development activities and are no longer ignored by local government stakeholders. For example, Rotary has recently supported the provision of drinking water and toilet facilities in Bhujel, minimising the unequal power relations and oppressions Bhujel women face.

Limitations and challenges of undertaking intersectional research

The project experienced several challenges and limitations in adopting an intersectional approach in action-research. We discuss these below.

Political-party influence and double standards by elite women

Even after the project identified certain specific sub groups of women, the project team experienced implicit power play among the locals while selecting participants for project activities. Political party influence, especially following changes in the political leadership after the local elections, played a significant role. Local party politics attempted to influence the selection of beneficiaries and staff as well as the interventions we carried out. The local leaders would extend support if the beneficiaries aligned with their interests, while creating hurdles otherwise. Additionally, elite women leaders in the executive committee of the CFUG displayed double standards. They showed a willingness to support marginalised women to establish enterprises during the project, yet showed arrogance toward them in the absence of the project.

The CFUG has informally processed herbal medicine for more than two decades. A committee, consisting of two men and one woman, was formed to manage the small scale herbal processing. The project team saw this as an opportunity to promote this potential forest-based enterprise among the project's target women. The hope was to integrate gender issues into the producers' committee. The project trained a group of poor indigenous and Dalit women in entrepreneurship. They were encouraged to identify potential enterprises suitable for their purposes. Most of the participants selected *trifala* (an herbal medicinal product composed of three different herbs). After several meetings, facilitated by project staff, the CFUG executive committee included thirteen women newly trained in the above-mentioned training. They were included to help advance the product to develop a successful and marketable item based on locally available herbal plants.

In the beginning, meetings of this group went well. However, as the project began providing machine support to expedite processing, which included a solar dryer machine to maintain hygiene and sanitation of the raw herbal seeds during drying, the CFUG started demonstrating oppressive behavior towards these poor women. They recognised the high product volume and market potential and started to exclude the newly added target women from the business.

The project aimed to support the construction of an improved shed for the safekeeping of machines to ensure sustainable production. However, during this phase, the CFUG not only persistently objected to the involvement of women but also subjected them to discouraging verbal expressions, reaching a point where the women began to feel threatened in their participation. This situation exemplifies the oppression faced by marginalised women, particularly Dalits and Indigenous women.

In this process, intersectional power and oppression were notably perpetuated by the women executive members of the CFUG board. They even used discouraging language to scold the newly added women

members. Thus it was not only discrimination stemming from male attitudes but a more profound form of oppression inflicted by elite women in powerful board positions upon economically disadvantaged women who genuinely needed new skills to improve their livelihoods.

Understanding the multi-dimensional oppressions of women

To understand the various forms of oppressions faced by various women, we used storytelling, participatory mapping and focus groups (discussed earlier). For example, during one focus group discussion with widowed women in Amarjyoti CFUG, we observed stark differences between the experiences of social and sexual harassment of younger and elderly widows.

During our discussion on "How do you experience outside mobility?", a young widow shared her experience of harassment by her community. In her words:

> I feel a kind of trauma to go out of home even to drop my son in the school… because some men would stare at me with greedy eyes… that tend to make me stoned; also being an internal migrant woman here, neighborhood women often tend to pass remarks on me as "shameless woman", that makes me terribly weak in mind as if I could hid myself under the earth! But I have my young child, my son, whom I must raise and educate.

After she shared this, an elderly widow (whose adult son works in Saudi Arabia and supports her) promptly remarked in a satirical way:

> You must be careful before talking about others in such a negative way and why don't you wear a dress covering your body and cover yourself with a scarf so that the men cannot see you? I was not that smart like you though!

Besides economic hardship, we observed that age played a strong role in shaping the experiences of widows. The prevailing discriminatory socio-cultural values and norms against women, particularly when combined with sexually harassing remarks towards a young widow, made her life particularly challenging. In this case, the young widow was raising a young child all by herself. Conversely, the elderly widow had economic support from her son and family members at home to console her if needed. The younger widow had been participating in a sewing training for livelihood organised by the local government ward office. She was also under pressure from having taken loans from micro finance institutions in the village. Her struggle is very personal but related to broader development dimensions: she is a migrant, single and faces loneliness, yet she is quite capable of improving her life with support from the project in terms of training, inputs, mentoring and counselling. These factors not only hindered their societal relations but also affected their interest and engagement in economic activities. However, by the project accurately identifying marginalised women and their interest in the enterprise, the young widow was empowered to develop herself as an entrepreneur.

Positionality and reflexivity

In action research it is important to pay attention to issues of reflexivity, positionality and power relations to conduct ethical research. Positionality in research refers to the researcher's own social, cultural and personal position within the study they are conducting. In was critical for the researchers in this project to be aware of their degree of privilege – shaped by race, class, educational attainment, income ability, gender and ethnicity – which affected the research process and outcomes. In the case of our project, our positionality as researchers was further defined by our location and positionality in a donor-funded action research team.

During the story telling exercise, the researchers' positionality was useful in eliciting women's stories of oppression. For example, one of the researchers is a senior citizen and another a single woman, which allowed women to relate to her as a maternal figure and share their stories of embarrassment comfortably. For example, a well-educated Dalit women hired as a trainer to train women entrepreneurs faced exclusion by Brahmin women who denied her entry to their homes. During a focus group discussion, poor Dalit women could not hold back their tears when they were sharing their experiences of suffering at the hands of their in-laws. Another woman, who was young and belonged to a advantaged group, faced exclusion from her family due to her husband's alcoholism and physically violence. These stories came up because the researchers are women and have established good rapport with the women entrepreneurs. However, there were times when the researchers were treated as outsiders.

The composition of the research team in terms of age, caste, and ethnicity has been advantageous in creating a safe space for women to share their stories and enhancing the researchers' status as insiders. However, donor-funding has sometimes reinforced the researchers' outsider status, showing distinctions between researchers and participants. Hence, the intersectional identities and insider/outsider researcher status play a significant role in regulating different forms of engagement and interaction with participants (Rodriguez & Ridgway, 2023). Moreover, the informal settings and discussions allowed us to be treated as insiders while the formal interaction reinforced our status as outsiders. The distinctions between formal and informal discussions allowed us to understand the extent to which power, relations and knowledge production can change depending on the setting (Rotz et al., 2022). Thus our experience highlights the fluid and interchangeable nature of positionality, subjectivity and spaces, where researchers can shift from being viewed as "friends" to being seen as "donors".

Conclusion

Adopting an intersectional approach is useful in understanding the various forms of oppression and injustice and the complexities associated with addressing the multifaceted aspects of women's dominance. We consciously applied the different methodological tenets of intersectionality, including oppression, context, complexity and relationality (as detailed in Misra et al., 2020). However, we did not isolate these tenets but

instead considered them in relation to each other, allowing us to explore and discuss the unequal power relations. Among the different methods we adopted, we found the story-telling methodology to be particularly well-suited for gaining a deep understanding of women's issues and the ways in which these issues differed for different individuals and groups of women. However, this method did require a greater time investment than other methods. Moreover, the storytelling approach allowed for the establishment of a harmonious relationship between the researchers and the women involved in the study. This relationship was facilitated by shared language, the diverse ages of researchers, and frequent visits and discussions with the women. Furthermore, storytelling enabled a more complex exploration of women's experiences and challenges and ultimately enriched the depth of our research findings.

The case study confirms the usefulness of employing an intersectional approach in action research. This approach has proven effective in uncovering the nuanced realities of women's lives, which are influenced by varying socio-economic and political forces, as well as interpersonal relationships within household decision-making processes. The study recommends the development of a gender-responsive intersectional analytical framework. This framework would serve as a vital resource to support researchers delving deeper into the intersecting factors that impact women's differential positions and experiences in their journey towards advancement.

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