Empowerment of Women through external (Project) intervention:  
Case Study of women two-wheel tractor operators 
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Background of the Project

In the summer of 2001 two proposed projects of the International Wheat and Maize Improvement Center (CIMMYT) on research and extension of new resource conservation tillage technologies in the Indo-Gangetic Plains of south Asia was started. These projects came in response to a renewed interest in processes of rural mechanization, which for decades had received little attention in international development. For the Nepal sites the goals of these two projects were to strengthen equity of access, poverty reduction, and gender orientations in the current rural mechanization processes in Nepal.

In an attempt to maximize the impacts of the two projects, the Nepal site project adopted a combined research and extension project in Nepal where farmers, NGOs, and scientists from CIMMYT and the National Agricultural Research Systems (NARC) worked together in a participatory action research. The objective was to achieve a socially equitable access of resource conservation and drudgery reduction technologies in tillage and crop establishment among small farmers. The basic power source for most of these technologies was the Chinese two-wheel tractor (also known as power tillers, walking tractors, mobile power units). The work was concentrated on the rice/wheat cropping systems in the plains (Terai), with the major sites being in the Parsa and Rupandehi districts.

The key feature at the field setting was mostly around group formation. Groups were based on identifying the poorest of the village and ensuring that some were included in the group. There was also the creation of formal management committees (five members) within each group which had a minimum of two women on each committee. Each group nominated two village motivators of which one had to be a woman. Finally, there was the selection of two two-wheel tractor operators from each Group - this selection of the operators was done by the group members - and training was given to them by the technical people of the Project. Among the six operators from Belba Village Development Committee (VDC) two were women (one from a women dominated user group and one from a male dominated user Group). In the second year of the project a new “all women’s’ group” was formed in Bahuwari village in Parsa VDC where a woman was trained to operate the two wheel tractor.

The case studies

The field case studies are of the individual lives of three women associated with these groups, who were trained as two-wheel tractor operators and who, thus have taken up, or have attempted to take up, a new gender role; that of plowing. The women belonged to:

• a male-dominated group from a village with a homogenous community of hill communities only;
a women-dominated group from a village which had both hill communities as well as terai community people;
• a women’s group from a village which had only the terai community people.
Thus the women belonged to not only different types of groups but also from different types of village and communities.

The study attempts to examine the social and cultural barriers that these women have crossed with the new role(s) they have assumed, at what cost and what it meant for these women to be “empowered” as a result of external intervention - in this case the two-wheel tractor. It provides an example of impacts or consequences of empowerment through Project interventions.

The challenges
Empowerment of women is closely linked to, and influenced by, the prevalent gender relations and representations of the community. Therefore, it is critical that this issue is considered. At the same time, in any given community gender relations and representations are not uniform, but rather there are discontinuities and contradictions. (Gurung, 1999)

The three women have had to face numerous socio-cultural challenges coming from their prescribed gender roles within the family/household and the community and society. First and foremost, a woman wielding big a machine like the two-wheel tractor was completely new and doubts were entertained by both men and women.

At the household level the women, although belonging to different communities, did not face much challenge or opposition as these were strong women in the household: one was the acting head of the family whose husband worked in Kathmandu and came home from time to time only; the second was the president of a women’s group under the Local Women’s Development Committee and the third was the main person running the family as her husband was physically weak. Thus, all these women shouldered a lot of responsibility and were handling household decisions as much as, if not more than, men. The only concern of the family members was that these women might not be physically up to the task thus leading to health problems. However, the women counter-argued by stating that they were already doing heavy manual tasks like digging and hoeing. Compared to these tasks, driving the two-wheel tractor would be less strenuous as they would be sitting down.

However, at the community and society level the story was different: the socio-cultural norms and practices posed great challenges to these women. All the women belonged to traditional Hindu communities – be it the Terai community or Hill community – where the socio-cultural norms and practices did not see or accept women wielding machines like tractors. The common belief was that women cannot, or more correctly, should not
drive/operate tractors; this was the job for men\(^1\). Besides, women did not have the physical strength to operate the tractors. Behind this concern of physical strength were the socio-cultural norms and practices that believed only men should operate big machines like tractors and not women. As a result when these women voiced their interest in being selected as the two-wheel tractor operators from their Groups, there was considerable opposition. Everyone said that these women were merely trying to be “different” but could not actually do the work.

Breaking this socio-cultural belief and practice was no minor feat. The main, if not the only, point that helped in overcoming this was the directive of the Project stating that women should be given the opportunity to learn this skill. Even while following the Project’s directive, the men as well as some women, did not take it seriously – as one man said: “Let them (the women) go for the training. It is just their whim. Once they see and experience what it is like and how difficult a task it is, they will know their place and will themselves give up the idea and let the men handle it.”

Even once this hurdle was overcome and the Group members agreed to send the women to learn this skill, actually accepting that the women could plow the fields with the two-wheel tractor was another thing. People were not willing to accept this fact when it came to practice. This was shown in various ways: some were teasing/joking, some were just humoring and even patronizing these women, while some did not give them any opportunity even to prove themselves. The women dealt with these various reactions in different ways and, some went ahead while some just gave up the idea of operating the two-wheel tractor. Their decision depended on three major factors:

i) The first and foremost was the type of Group they belonged to: Where the woman was from the women only user group they had the support of the women. Not only this, they had no male to turn to, nor did they want to hand over their newly found asset to men who were not in the Group. Therefore, for the women from this group it was not so difficult to continue the role once the training was over. In the case of the women-dominated user group (from which one man and one woman member had been trained) too it was not very difficult for the woman to continue the role. This was mainly as the women members supported her. Additionally, the male operator was not always available as he worked as a daily wage earner in various labor jobs. But in the male-dominated Group (there were only five women members in a Group of twenty-one) the woman did not have the support of the men, who were in majority, so she could not continue.

Thus it is clear that the absence of male is a major factor in women accessing the machinery (two-wheel tractor) and thus being able to continue with the new role.

ii) The second factor was the type of household (class?) the women belonged to. In the cases where the women were successful in continuing to operate the two-wheel tractor,

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\(^1\) Indeed, this can even be considered heretical in Hinduism as was reported some years back when a widowed woman in the eastern Terai of Nepal took up with her young son to plow her fields with oxen. The ward chairman, who was a woman, had her arrested and fined for performing a man’s duties.
the women belonged to well-placed households, both socially as well as economically, in the village: The terai community woman being the president of the local women’s Credit and Savings Group was held in high esteem in the village. Furthermore, her family was relatively well-off. The woman from the hill community, although not very highly placed socially, was also relatively well-off as her husband had a secure job in Kathmandu.

However, the third woman, who was also from a hill community and belonged to the same upper caste (Chhetri) as the other male members, came from an economically poorer family than the others. As a result, her family was of a lower social status in the village. There was a lot of pressure from the richer and socially higher class men, as well as women, to prevent her from operating the two-wheel tractor. This pressure was applied in various ways: (a) no one from the village called her to plow their field; they always called the male operator. This was despite seeing her plow her own field. (b) People told her that since the two-wheel tractor is old, it keeps breaking down and so if it broke down while she was plowing she would not be able to handle it. Although this was probably true, as then she would require help from others to get it back, this would apply to the male drivers too. (c) The villagers never talked to her about the two-wheel tractor at all – they completely ignored the fact that she had undergone training and could operate it. In the beginning she and her husband tried to talk with others about it and even asked them to call her to plow their fields but no one ever agreed. Due to this attitude of the villagers, the couple stopped discussing the subject. Furthermore, the husband now tells her to forget the whole thing.

Even for the other two women from better-off families who continued to operate the two-wheel tractor, things were not so easy. They too faced opposition at the community level in different forms. The woman from the women dominated group had to face a lot of disbelief, teasing and patronizing. She had to convince both the men and women before she was given the opportunity to plow others’ fields. This she did by plowing her own fields first. Even then people were patronizing her. As she puts it, “I plowed my own fields first as I had to show and convince others that I could do it before they would hire me to plow their fields – a lot of people, both men and women, came to watch me. Many laughed and some clapped when I started to plow and joked with me.”

Every time she drove the two-wheel tractor on to the road to go to fields, people would turn to look at her and some even laughed. The men would pass comments like, “now women too are driving tractors and plowing fields – what kind of days are here!” or "Here comes the ‘hawaldarni’ with her ‘bullocks’ to plow the fields”. Being a spirited woman she would retort back to all the comments. She said that despite all this, she could fight back and continue with her new role, mainly because she was confident that she could do it and because her family supported her fully.

*“Hawaldar” is a rank in the army and police which her husband had held when he was in the police – now he is retired; and among the people here the wife too gets called by this name with “ni” added at the end of the husband’s title thus she is known as “hawaldarni”.

2To the first comment her retort was:” Haven’t you seen women driving tempos and cars in Kathmandu?” To the second comment she would say: “Yes, see my bullocks how good they are, they don’t need fodder so I don’t have to do all the extra work of collecting and fetching fodder or preparing it. Why don’t you also get these types of bullocks?"
The woman from the all women’s group faced the same disbelief and jeering from the men. In her case, however, the women believed in her and she did not have to prove herself to them. In fact, all the women asked her numerous questions about the machine and showed a lot of interest. On the other hand, the men had to first be convinced. Furthermore, they even said to her that “women go to such trainings only to get the per diems”. It was only after she plowed several fields that the men were convinced. According to her, one of the other reasons that she could convince the men to allow her to plow the fields was that none of the men had driven the machine before, so they had to give her that opportunity.

iii) The third factor was the local situation in the village. Where the two women were successful in continuing with the new role, the local situation was such that there were hardly any or no men to take up this task: in one village although one man had undergone the training he was not available most of the time, and in the other village, there were no men who at that time had undergone the training. But in the case of the woman who had to give up the new role, there was a man who had undergone the same training and was available to do the work.

However, it is not to say that the three factors mentioned above, work in isolation but, rather work in collusion with, or influenced by, one another. Some other factors such as, household support and situation, the woman’s self-confidence and awareness, the prevalent gender norms in the community/village as well as outside, etc., also influence the whole process.

Another significant factor that emerged in this case was the type of medium used to bring about empowerment. The general notion is that women from poor, lower-class families are “freer” to move out of customary roles. But when the change of role depends on a machine (which is still expensive for poor women) this notion did not apply. In these cases the empowerment, through change of role, depended on a machine (the two-wheel tractor) over which one had to have ownership and control in order to use or access it. Therefore, women from the financially and socially well-placed household could take up the new role as the two-wheel tractor was equally under their control. Since this belonged to a women’s group no one could stop them from using the tractor. Whereas in case of the poor woman, the tractor was not under her control – it was controlled by the richer members- so she could not access it. Thus the general notion of women from poorer families being freer to move out of customary roles is true only when the “role” is in the form of labor, etc. over which she has control.

Thus the empowerment process involves numerous socio-cultural factors that have to be confronted by the woman involved.

**Conclusion**

The above cases show that empowerment of women through external interventions, depends a lot on individual women, their families and the existing local situation.
It involves considerable social cost for the women involved: other members of the community may see her in different contexts - some with distaste, others with envy, and still others as an example or role model. Intimately related to all this is how the woman makes sense of all these issues, and how she wards off those who try to undermine her. It is only after all these processes that women will eventually decide if the effort is worth it.

Furthermore, individual women and men behave differently in different activities and spheres of life depending on the situation. Similarly, when confronted with new empowerment interventions that affect their roles, responsibilities and lives, individual women respond in different ways. These responses depend her self-esteem and confidence and at the same time also express the way she selectively “embraces, tolerates, opposes, or ignores gender ideologies”\(^3\) of the community/society. Therefore, individual choices and actions of the women play a crucial role in the process of empowerment.

The case studies also show that any intervention aimed at empowerment can lead to a complex and sometimes contradictory evidence. On one hand, there is evidence of great confidence and self–esteem and, on the other hand there is the never-ending struggle of women, leading to an almost hostile situation, not only for the woman, but for her family too. Thus, it is never a positive story only, instead, it is a complex social process involving numerous factors with many layers and facets that have to be negotiated by the woman concerned.

Reference:

\(^3\) Gurung, 1999, p 7.