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A study on the reflections of women and men on a women's empowerment project: A case study of Sindhuli, Nepal

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A study on the reflections of women and men on a women's empowerment project: A case study
of Sindhuli, Nepal

Shreyasha Khadka

(May 2019)

A Master's Paper

Submitted to the faculty of Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, in partial fulfillment of
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And accepted on the recommendation of

Cynthia Caron, Chief Instructor

Abstract

A study on the reflections of women and men on a women's empowerment project: A case study of Sindhuli, Nepal

Shreyasha Khadka

Women empowerment and gender equality are considered key aspects of achieving sustainable development goals. At the same time, the empowerment of women is also a process of change that enables women to build capacity in order to make life choices and act on them. Central to women empowerment is incorporating men into the process. Men should be included to deliver effective empowerment through collaboration and interdependence, and to understand how women empowerment works in a patriarchal setting. Women's economic empowerment such as Rural Economic Empowerment Project (RWEE) strives to empower and improve the status of rural women in Nepal. This study takes a qualitative approach to understand and examine the perspectives and lived experiences of women (project beneficiaries of RWEE) and their spouses (men) of what empowerment is and its significance in the context of the project. The study finds that women perceive the empowerment project have beneficial outcomes in their economic and social aspects with regard to better household decision making, income generation, mobility and family well-being. In addition, men also bring a positive and progressive view on the changing roles of women in the village. Despite significant development of women, gender equality is perceived to be relatively persistent given that Nepal is a patriarchal society, and that strategic gender inclusive laws are not effectively implemented in all sectors of the country. This study aims to bring forth the varied perspectives and lived experiences of what women empowerment is from the rural beneficiaries of the empowerment project. It also informs that empowerment is multifaceted and requires an intersectional approach to achieve empowerment of women. Similarly, incorporating men into women empowerment projects in a country like Nepal can support to address inherent structures of gender inequalities and subordination both in grassroots and policy level.

Keywords: empowerment, women, rural, decision making, income generation, men.

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Acronyms:

CAESC- Community Agriculture Extension Service Centers

CEDAW- The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women

CIDA- Canadian International Development Agency

CBS- Central Bureau of Statistics

DADO- District Agriculture Development Office

DSLO- District Livestock Service Office

FAO- Food and Agriculture Organization

GESI - Gender Equality and Social Inclusion

GoN- Government of Nepal

GRB- Gender Development Index

GDI- Gender Development Index

IFAD- International Fund for Agricultural Development

JP RWEE- Joint Programme Rural Women Economic Empowerment

ICRW- International Center for Research on Women

NDHS- Nepal Demographic Health Survey

RWEE- Rural Women Economic Empowerment

UNDP- United Nations Development Programme

UN Women- United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

VDC- Village Development Committee

WEAI- Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index

WFP- World Food Program

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Introduction

Women's empowerment is crucial to achieving gender equality. Gender equality attempts to improve men and women's access to rights and their overall well-being. World Bank (2007) defines gender equality in terms of the definition of World Development Report (2006) as the equal access to 'opportunities that allow people to pursue a life of their own choosing and to avoid extreme deprivations in outcomes' (2007: 106). Since the inception of gender equality and women empowerment in the development discourse, feminist writers have been critical of the term empowerment and argue that it is inclined towards an instrumentalist and efficiency approach, and conversion into buzzwords for accelerating economic growth (Batliwala, 2007; Cornwall 2006). Nonetheless, reorienting itself beyond its instrumental and economic growth approach, World Bank Report on Gender Equality and Development states that gender equality 'matters intrinsically, because the ability to live the life of one's own choosing and be spared from absolute deprivation is a basic human right and should be equal for everyone' (2012: 3), such that women's economic empowerment has positive implications in family and society.

The academic scholarship defines empowerment of women as a meaningful process of change. In the words of Batliwala (1995) the outcome of this process is by where women are able to challenge patriarchal and oppressive gender norms and have better access and autonomy over resources. Cornwall (2016: 344) puts emphasis on empowerment as 'an unfolding, iterative process that is fundamentally about shifts in power relations', between men and women. Women make up more than half of the world's population, therefore, Malhotra et. al (2011) states that women's economic empowerment should be central in meeting development goals. World Bank Poverty and Gender Group Report (2012) also indicate that women's control over resources has a significant positive impact on the health and education of children which leads to better wellbeing prospects for future generations. Empowerment is not only the provision of resources to increase women's access to resources and decision making. It is also a process of greater realization to be able to have the capacity to occupy that decision making power (Rowlands 1995). Empowering women needs to enable an approach that takes into consideration different contexts, power dynamics, and process of change in various levels that recognize the diverse needs of women (Cornwall, 2016). In addition, women's need and interests in the planning and empowerment

context vary not only in terms of specific socio economic and historical context, but they are expressed differently through class, ethnicity, religion and time (Moser, 1989; Wieringa, 1994).

Moser (1989) defines gender needs as practical and strategic needs that should be taken into account in gender planning and development. She defines strategic gender needs as those needs that are derived from an analytical understanding of women's position and subordination to men. These include choices in marriage, living, family planning, decision on who has custody over children, physical mobility, as well as political inclusion, removal of institutionalized forms of discrimination such land or property ownership, or access to credit (Kabeer, 2005: 14; Molyneux, 1985: 233). Practical gender needs and interests flows from women's immediate needs and means of livelihood including provision of food, shelter, income generating activities and so on. Moser (1989) states that in terms of gender planning, 'policies for meeting practical gender needs have to focus on the domestic arena, on income-earning activities, and also on community-level requirements of housing and basic services' (ibid; 1803). It is imperative that 'planning for low-income women in the Third World must be based on their interests, in other words their prioritized concerns' (ibid; 1802).

Gender Equality and Women Empowerment in the context of Nepal

Nepal is a patriarchal society. Patriarchy is persistent in every society which shapes social norms and influences women and men's roles. Due to dominant social and cultural norms in Nepal, women are often unable to achieve improvement, self-dependency and efficacy in their lives. The status of women in Nepal, mostly in rural areas is usually subordinate to men due to existing cultural norms and social values that prevent women from entering or practicing productive roles such as earning income, making decisions within and outside of household or having access to economic assets such as land, house or market or receiving education. For instance, Nepal Demographic Health Survey (NDHS) 2011 found that 40% of women in Nepal had no education (i.e., were illiterate), in comparison to only 14% of men (Pudasaini, 2015).

The Government of Nepal (GoN), along with national and international organizations are now taking steps to improve the position of women through projects that will improve their social and economic empowerment. Since 1980's Nepal recognized the importance of women's role in promoting their contribution to national economy (Ojha and Weber, 1993). Nepal is also a

signatory of international laws that ensure development and protection of women such as CEDAW since 1991 that is committed to eliminating all forms of discrimination against women in the country (Pudasaini, 2015).

In order to raise the status of women and achieve gender equality in countries such as Nepal, national governments as well as development organizations have increased their focus on women empowerment. In the past decade, Nepal has been experiencing gradual improvements on several indicators relating to human development, human rights and gender parity. By the year 2001, women's access to economic resources such as land and house increased to 20 and 11 percent and in recent years the percentage of the population living on less than \$1 per day decreased from 42% in 1996 to 23.4% in 2011 (Pudasaini, 2015; CBS, 2011). Similarly, the Gender Equality Index in Nepal is 0.479 (UNDP, 2014). As a developing country, Nepal has implemented several legal reforms to achieve gender equality and curb violence against women. Nepal has implemented gender and social inclusion (GESI) and gender responsive budgeting (GRB), including investments that link women with productive resources such as income generating activities. Therefore, the gender development index (GDI) in Nepal increased from 0.310 to 0.912 between 1995 and 2014. Similarly, in the policy spectrum, the Interim Constitution and 2015 Constitution of Nepal have provisions in supporting gender equality and social inclusion, including the provision to promote inclusion of all marginalized groups, Dalits, Janajatis, Madhesi and such. Despite considerable change in women's status, there are significant gaps in empowering women in Nepal. Structures of subordination within patriarchal societal structure and gaps in policy implementation in grassroots level is an impediment in fulfilling gender equality. UN Women in Nepal advocates to have a strong legal and national policy instrument that protect women's rights, bring transformative change in gender norms and relations as well as promote men's inclusion in advocacy and implementation to ensure gender equality and women empowerment (Pudasaini, 2015).

Research Questions

This study attempts to address two main research questions:

1. What is the situation of women who are the beneficiaries of rural women economic empowerment project in Ranichuri village in Sindhuli, Nepal?

2. How has this women empowerment project influenced household dynamics of men and women who participated in the program?

The study's sub questions are:

1. To what extent are women who participated in the capacity, training and skill building program able to exercise decision making ability over income and decisions in the household?
2. How do women and men perceive that women's roles are changing since participating in empowerment project?

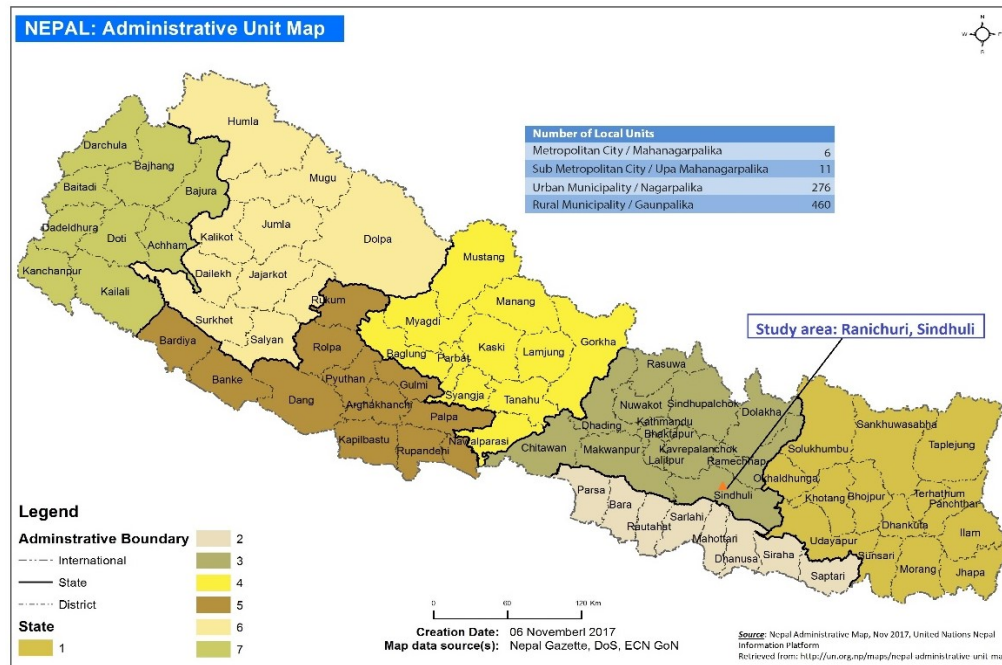
Project Background and Research Site: Rural Women Economic Empowerment Project (RWEE), Ranichuri village, Sindhuli District, Nepal

Study Area

Sindhuli district lies in the south of Central Nepal, and covers an area of 2491 km, with a population of about 296,192 (CBS, 2012). The percentage of literacy of women and men are 52.6% and 70.9% respectively. Sindhuli is known for its historical significance. Sindhuli Gadhi, a famous landmark in the district is a place where British soldiers were defeated for the first time in Asia in 1767 A.D¹. Sindhuli connects with BP highway, a major highway in Nepal. Ranichuri is a former Village Development Committee (VDC) of Sindhuli District, known as Kamalamai municipality.

Ranichuri village is the study area of this research, as it is one of the active village development committee where the project has been successfully implemented. Ranichuri was selected as the study area because of the type of project interventions and the diversity of people living in the village. In Ranichuri, given the number of women's groups and their leadership in building an agriculture cooperative for the purpose of expanding women's reach to agriculture credit and farming, it therefore was important to study women's leadership and perceptions of empowerment as envisioned by them.

¹ History of Sindhuli derived from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sindhuli_District



Map of Nepal: Study area, Sindhuli (Source: UN Nepal Information Platform)

The Project

The Joint Program on “Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women” (JP RWEE) is a global initiative with the goal to secure rural women’s livelihoods and rights in order to achieve sustainable development. JP RWEE aims to improve the status of women in rural areas and is jointly implemented by FAO, IFAD, WFP and UN Women in Ethiopia, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Nepal, Niger, and Rwanda (IFAD, 2017).

The JP RWEE project in Nepal is a 5-year program initiated in 2012 by UN Women, FAO, IFAD and WFP to promote economic empowerment of rural women through securing livelihood and rights of women for sustainable development (FAO, 2016). The project facilitates transformation through rural women’s leadership, to achieve gender equality and women’s empowerment. The implementation of RWEE encompasses three local units of Sindhuli, Sarlahi and Rautahat in Provinces 1 and 25 under the leadership of the Ministry of Agricultural Development (MoAD), Government of Nepal. RWEE started formation of women groups in Sindhuli district from 28th January 2016 in coordination with District Agriculture Development Office (DADO) and District Livestock Service Office (DLSO). A total of 57 women groups were formed in which 5 women groups were in a commercial vegetable farming cluster and 52 women group were placed in

kitchen garden and nutrition cluster. The vegetable crop started to harvest from first week of May 2016 in commercial vegetable farming cluster. Farmers have started selling the commercial vegetables bringing substantial income and profit back to their households. Altogether, 1292 households with 111 households in commercial farming and 1181 households in kitchen garden have been directly benefited from RWEE program (FAO, 2016).

Literature Review

Achieving gender equality by empowering women addresses power relations between men and women, by giving women more access to resources such as land, credit and economic labor work opportunities (Morrison, et.al, 2007). Kabeer (1999: 437) defines empowerment as the process by which those 'who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability'. Women's empowerment is concerned with promoting gender justice with regards to women, girls and marginalized groups. Srilatha (1994: 130) views empowerment in terms of reclaiming power and defines it as the 'process of challenging existing unequal power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power'; it includes the expansion of choices for women and an increase of ability to exercise those choices when women are empowered (UNDP, 1995). Similarly, Bennet (2002) defines empowerment as having the capacity of individuals to influence, challenge and hold accountable the structures that subjugate them.

The narrative around the meaning of empowerment is multifaceted. Different writers state that women's empowerment cannot be defined and measured in a single dimension. Kabeer states that empowerment entails a 'process of change' (1999; 437). Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007 (citing Oxaal & Baden 1997) argue that empowerment cannot be defined in terms of specific interventions or outcomes because it involves a 'process whereby women can independently analyze, develop and voice their needs and interests, without them being pre-defined, or imposed from above, by planners or other social actors' (Oxaal & Baden, 1997:6). Empowerment allows individuals, men and women to reach their full potential, to improve participation in social and economic life outside the household, and to enable their own capabilities.

In attempts to achieve gender equality in economic development, women's empowerment has emerged as one of the leading subjects for debates (Kapitsa, 2008). Interventions geared towards gender equality aims to empower women by increasing their control over household

resources and income, by providing them access to credit, and through education (practical gender needs). But to attain empowerment is not just about giving women the tools, it involves transforming multifaceted aspect of women's lives and the policies and laws that structure opportunities for women (strategic gender needs).

Women's economic empowerment

ICRW (2018) states that a woman is economically empowered when she has both the ability to succeed and advance economically and the power to make and act on economic decisions. Several indicators define the empowerment of women in economic aspect. For instance, ownership of assets is one important way through which access to employment helps to empower women in developing countries (Agarwal, 2001). Today, many community development practitioners are concerned about measuring whether or not they have achieved their goals and 'empowered' women.

This study draws on the concept of women empowerment, as agency and the ability to make choices (Kabeer, 1999). Kabeer's (1999) definition of the ability to exercise choices encompasses resources, agency and achievements where resources such as employment opportunities and household resource allocation improve the freedom to make choice; agency allows the ability to define one's goal and act upon it in areas such as mobility, access to and voice in making household decisions and achievements that delivers better welfare and well-being children.

Women empowerment in decision making and economic autonomy

Women's household decision-making is often used as an indicator of women's empowerment. The notion of women empowerment entails equal opportunities for women, especially regarding decisions that affect their livelihoods. According to Kate Young (1993) cited by Rahman (2013), empowerment enables women to take control of their own lives, set their own agenda, organize to help each other and make demands on larger level to support for change. One widely used scale to assess women empowerment within rural and agricultural setting is the Women's Empowerment in Agricultural Index (WEAI) (Alkire et.al, 2013) that measures women empowerment through five domains of empowerment in agriculture: the decisions making about

agricultural production; access to and decision-making power about productive resources; control of use of income; leadership in the community and time allocation.

Steele, Amin and Naved, (1998) also assert that empowerment of women brings significant improvement in women's participation in household decision making, family planning, children survival rate, health and nutrition and children's education especially girls' education. Women's income generation through increased engagement in agriculture and farming activities increase their personal autonomy and enhance their social status within family such that they are able to engage in decision making. Having means of earning income allows women to contribute in household expenses and saving. In addition, it gives women the ability to utilize income on purchasing personal and household goods, shifts the traditional roles of women towards being productive and be able to leverage into managing how household budgets are used. Likewise, empowerment has positive outcomes on women's ability to participate and engage in community activities, which in turn, allows them to expand their right to move independently, and engage in productive work.

Income generation and family well-being

Women's ability to earn income help them to have more power and choices related to household decision making with regard to household's consumption, education and health, as well as participation in the political process (Chowhudry et al., 2005). Various studies postulate that when women and mothers have greater control over different assets, resources are optimally allocated to food and children's health, nutrition and education. Doss (1996) states that in Ghana, an increase in the share of women's assets raises household spending on food and children's schooling. Therefore, women's increased income and control over household and agriculture has better outcomes in children's well-being. Income helps women to invest in their children's education and health, and also becomes a medium to exercise autonomy by being less dependent on men economically and financially. Schmidt (2012) contends that the trends in developing economies worldwide suggest that as relative female intra household bargaining powers improve, consumption preference favor basic needs that promote child welfare. Children are properly fed when women are able to make household and economic decisions (Smith et al., 2003).

Women Empowerment and Mobility

Empowerment of women not only increases the possibility of mobility, but also gives women the ability to reason and challenge prejudices and social criticism against their right to movement. When women engage actively in the community, they are exposed to potential resources that amplifies their involvement in extra-household activities as well as gives them a better world view that increases their mobility outside home (Sharma, 2007, citing Mayoux, 2001). In addition, Mariadoss (2012) explains that women's empowerment through self-help groups brings greater means of mobility, more participation and better engagement in decision-making processes. Similar studies such as of Hashemi et al. (1996) also purport that women's participation in empowerment activities such as credit programs are positively associated with improvement in physical mobility, ability to make purchases, reduced discriminations within family and increased participation in community campaigns (ADB, 1997:15). In addition, Rao (2001) argues that women can perform same tasks, as men when they have better access to greater mobility and transport.

Gender Needs and Men in Women Empowerment

Women empowerment entails tackling the barriers of discrimination in many ways which will shape women's choices, opportunities to change and improve well-being at large. Having said that, gender roles that discriminate against women are also shaped by societal structures which largely influences the ways in which pathways of empowerment interplay in women's life. Kabeer (1999: 3) states that 'indicators of women's empowerment must be sensitive to the ways in which context shapes the processes of empowerment, as well as to whether women are empowered in the specific roles that they play as mothers and/or as wives or partners in particular contexts'. A 1999 CIDA report mentions that empowerment is therefore not just about context, but also about people both men and women taking control over their lives by solving problems together, building skills, gaining self-confidence and self-reliance. Rahman, 2013 claims that the concept of gender empowerment should not be mistaken for the empowerment of man vis-a-vis woman or the vice versa. Therefore, rather than situating men as a means to women empowerment, incorporating them into women empowerment interventions is fundamental to understand how it influences and affects the gender dynamics within a household. Furthermore, it is also critical to put into context

that empowerment is about giving power and ability to women, without compromising the ability of men or taking power away from men.

However, in contrast, it is arguable to state that giving women the tools (such as training and employment) to empower herself will not directly benefit and improve her overall life conditions. The existing social and gender power relations very much likely only produce marginal improvement of women. There is a tendency to put more emphasis on repressive forms of subordination in gender relations rather than on the interdependency between men and women (Caron, 2018). In certain context such as traditional societies, empowerment strategies might inhibit to fully transform the existing social and structural conditions that interplay with greater sense of empowerment. For example, for Sri Lankan women, acquiring financial autonomy in domestic setting through education and employment might not always transition into having autonomy within a larger social and organizational setting (Malhotra and Mather, 1997). West (2006) also states that while more educated and employed women may have a greater say in financial decisions, they do not necessarily have more say in other matters within the household. This is pertinent in the context where gender roles and norms dictate and inherently influence how men and women respond to the actions that determine their ability to empower. A woman may work, but if she has no say in how resources are managed or allocated in the household, she is unlikely to gain any control or power in the household (ibid). In this regard, structural barriers such as sources of women's disempowerment that exist needs to be taken into consideration which also includes women's relation to men. This specifically does not entail that women's empowerment should be/or is contingent on men. However, empowerment should build on equal partnerships with men along women's livelihood trajectory. Rahman argues that gender empowerment is a 'broad category which includes empowerment of women without creating a misgiving of emasculation of men. It stands for fostering a balance in gender relations as against the one-sided women empowerment approach' (2013: 12). Disregarding men's involvement in empowerment will often make men's roles and contribution to empower women invisible. In addition, Chant (2000) argument states that, 'the absence of men is likely to increase women's workloads and responsibilities, and the success of 'women-only' projects is constrained as men are a central part of gender relations'.

It becomes important to consider men and women's roles in a household to understand the dynamics of empowerment because gender and women empowerment programs seek to transform gender roles and improve gender relations between men and women. Male family members can act as economic empowerment gatekeepers for women by giving them access to capital, information, and networks that would otherwise remain out of their reach because of context-specific gender barriers (ILO, 2014). As men usually involve in the management and production of assets in a household context, they are more likely to include women to improve her level of agency and empowerment (Acharya et al., 2010).

Despite these barriers, this is not to disregard that women's ability to control household resources can improve better outcomes on next generation which is an important step to achieve sustainable development (Meinzen-Dick and Quisumbing, 2012). Therefore, empowerment is 'both a group and an individual attribute, both a process (that of gaining power) and a condition that of being empowered' (Dixon-Muller, 1998: 2).

Research methodology

Feminist research approach

Using a feminist interpretivist approach, this study aims at understanding the dynamics of gender equality through empowerment of women by examining and understanding the issues of women's status, notions of patriarchy as well as women's experiences and concerns about the changes they have perceived through the interventions that aim to empower them.

I use feminist standpoint theory, which respects the knowledge and experiences of people (in this context the women and men of Ranichuri village) from where they are situated, to understand the diversity of experiences that women bring to the concept of their empowerment, with regard to their culture and context. Feminist standpoint approach also takes into consideration the diversity of women's experiences and differences in how men and women think, what they think about and what they regard as important (Brisolara, Seigart and Sengupta, 2014: 7). From a researcher's perspective, this approach is appropriate in valuing the everyday lived experiences of women and men in Nepal. Therefore, throughout the study and in person interviews, I attempt to bring out the experiences and understanding of what women empowerment means to people in Ranichuri village, Sindhuli. Yet, this approach is necessary to get a nuanced understanding of

people's experiences of empowerment and their perceived idea of change in their lives that is acquired through an in-depth interview method. This study is an attempt to explore and build the researcher's commitment to studying women's development and bringing forth a local understanding of empowerment from women's perspectives of Nepali rural women.

Qualitative research method: In-person Interview

The main objective of this study is to understand the lived experiences of rural women empowerment project beneficiaries by studying women's perception of being empowered within the household and social context that address gender inequality and promote efforts to empower rural women's economic abilities. It also understands men's perception on their involvement and importance of women empowerment from the data collected through interviews from Ranichuri village in Sindhuli, Nepal. Primary data was collected through in person interview with women project beneficiaries and their spouses. The research focuses on learning about and understanding the experiences and local understanding of women's empowerment and its processes. The study also considers any changes within men and women's lives in regards to household decision making ability, mobility and personal autonomy in the village from their individual perspective.

A total of ten households were selected as a part of the case study for this study where women beneficiaries of Rural Women Economic Empowerment (RWEE) and their spouses were individually interviewed for data collection. This study is based on the interviews and personal discussions among 10 women beneficiaries and their spouses, in total approximately 20 study participants with regard to their experiences on the training and of the skills they have received in promoting women's level of empowerment and change in household and community level. It also studies how men view empowerment and its effectiveness on women in the village. This research is a qualitative case study of a Rural Women Economic Empowerment (RWEE) project jointly conducted by UN Women, international and local community organizations in respect to the change and perception of empowerment perceived by the project beneficiaries. The research was conducted in the summer of 2018 in Ranichuri village, Sindhuli region of Nepal with the help of a research assistant. She is a resident of Ranichuri village. The in person interviews were taken in the homes, farms and community of the participants.

Subjectivity Statement

As a researcher engaging in qualitative research on rural women empowerment in Nepal, I have varied experiences and understanding that shape my view of the lives of women in Nepal and their need of empowerment. I am a middle class, Nepali woman studying in the United States. In addition to being a native Nepali, I have had numerous experiences in working with diverse groups of women in project operations, education and development work which I believe must be bracketed in order to study and understand the local women's perspectives of what they feel about empowerment.

Being a Nepali and coming to interact with village residents on women empowerment project, I was often mistaken to be a representative or program staff of the organization that implemented RWEE project in Ranichuri village. As a researcher, I had to constantly inform the respondents and village residents of my role and purpose of doing the research interviews and refrain oneself from allowing the village respondents to expect any incentives in the research process. However, being a native of Nepal had a huge influence in the aspect of interacting with the respondents, because it opened up opportunities to meet different people, find commonality in language and culture as well as build rapport and trust with women in the village. In addition, my positionality as a Nepali woman, I was cognizant of the ethical considerations and appropriate behavior given my presence in that context, such as of speaking in public, greeting people, helping host family in kitchen and respecting food. As Bhadra (2016) mentions, researchers need to accommodate themselves to women's timings and to visit them in their personal space. She mentions that lending a helping hand to women while conducting in person interview will most likely break the researcher-respondent hierarchy.

As a researcher I believe that empowerment is a subjective phenomenon which is beyond the external capabilities such as the ability to earn and mobilize oneself to improve their livelihood. Rappaport (1984) asserts that empowerment ought to be defined and described by ones involved and it is thus more than participation in decision-making; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions (Rahman 2013). As a student of international development studies, I am aware that my conception of empowerment may not align with the notion of empowerment of the village residents of Ranichuri. Although my own

conceptualization of empowerment has had an impact in a way that I have approached the study, I am being cognizant that my own worldview about women's lives in Nepal, the scenario of men and women's gender relations do not intersect or result in a biased outcome with regard to the research study that is collected and analyzed. Being a native of Nepal allowed me as a researcher to gain more nuanced understanding and depth of interaction with research respondents. Nonetheless, being a Nepali myself I need to ensure that I am also a student and woman coming from United States to study her Nepali native women does not obscure the biases that could have occurred during the interview and data analysis process because as a Nepali, conducting research from an insider's perspective could privilege certain information because it corresponds with the researcher's own knowledge of empowerment.

Results of the study and data analysis

The research builds on the data analysis and discussion from the primary data collected through in person interviews that were recorded, transcribed in English language and coded using qualitative research method and inductive reasoning. The process of data collection is sex disaggregated, where women project beneficiaries and their husbands were separately interviewed for the research study.

The data analysis is based on the thematic areas that are developed and is relative to understand the overall experiences and outcomes of empowerment, from women project beneficiaries' viewpoint including men's experiences of women empowerment programs and builds on the understanding of women empowerment within the literature and relevant studies. The analysis aims to study the outcomes of the development interventions specifically targeted to empower rural women, and to determine in what ways empowerment strategies are linked to important empowerment indicators such as decision making, agency, well-being and so forth.

The research explored how women who participated in the rural women economic empowerment project in Ranichuri village and their husbands drew from their experiences and how they perceive that the program changed their lives with respect to women's control over resources such as income, decision making, mobility, well-being as well as community participation. Very similar to most of the Women Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) indicators, the findings of this study shows that empowerment of rural women also include the ability to have a personal voice

(both in domestic and community setting and in farming and household), ownership of resources such as income, participation in community life and contribution to family well-being.

During analysis, several themes related to women's empowerment emerged such as decision-making capacity, mobility, knowledge on farming so on and so forth. Below I discuss each theme and provide evidence through illustrative quotes. Then I discuss how these themes relate to the literature either through confirmation of previous findings or adding new perspectives. The thematic areas are as follows:

Box1: Profile of respondents. The case of Ganga who is a beneficiary of the project.

Ganga Maya Sunar (name changed) is a woman in her late 30's. She is married and has four children. She is from a Dalit caste group, a minority caste in Nepal. She raises livestock such as goat and does farming for livelihood. She has been able to raise 15 goats after she received livestock training and aspires to raise up to 50. Her motivation to attend women empowerment and community programs is to learn new skills and knowledge on income generation.

Her husband is employed at a Gobar Gas company. She says, 'I earn and my husband earns so we use our wholesome income for household and livelihood expenses and for our four children'.

Interviewed on 7/18/2018

Agency- choice to exercise control over resources:

One of the indicator of women empowerment is women's ability to gain control over resources and choices that determine their action. Narayan (2002) defines empowerment as 'the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives' (2002: 14). Women's participation in women empowerment projects allowed them to access agricultural input for farming which they used to sell their produce in the market.

1. Making purchases by women

Given the patriarchal society, most women in Nepal have limited opportunity to handle or control household resources for their benefit. Social norms limit their access to resources within and outside the household that allow them to increase their knowledge and ability to make informed choices. Women in Ranichuri village who have had the opportunity to become the beneficiaries of rural women economic empowerment project were able to gain access to information, farming and income generating skills such that they were able to use their farming

skills in their farming business and crop plantation. This includes knowledge on farming and using that as a source of income to earn livelihood. Not only that, some women also raise livestock to earn a living. This has allowed them to take the produce to sell in the nearby market or save earnings for future consumption. With an increase in the ability to earn, women in the village are

Box 2: Profile of Respondents. The case of Rita.

Rita Karki (name changed) is a married woman in 30's and a resident of Ranichuri village, now known as Kamalamayi municipality. She is married and has three children, two sons and a daughter. Rita and her husband do farming for a living. She is a member of local women's group and is a beneficiary of vegetable farming training program under RWEE project. She is happy that her income from farming is helping to send her children to school.

She also shares that, *'We learnt a lot from the empowerment project and received benefits by learning to sell vegetables. I don't have to ask money from my husband that way we can have savings'.*

Interviewed on 7/17/2018

able to make small purchases for themselves and their household and children without having an obligation to be restricted from using the income in their personal activities.

In the past where most men had the power to save, control and use the household income; now it is more evident that majority of women can use their earning by themselves. This ability also indicates that women's control over her income and ability to use income is dependent on her ability to earn which increases her autonomy and agency over what is hers. At the same time, it has also allowed these women to negotiate and engage in decision making with men on doing major purchases.

One of the woman respondent shared,

"Yes, I can decide on purchasing goods. My husband hands the income earned in the household to me, so I can purchase what I want and can. Yes, I do earn a little by farming and I can use that for daily use". (Married female respondent)

Similarly, another respondent stated that,

"Yes, before buying anything, I ask my husband, but there are no restrictions in our family". (Married female interviewed on 07/18/2018)

2. Control over income

During the in person interviews, women in the village expressed that their farming and skill development training allowed them to earn income which helped them to contribute to the overall household income. It implies that most women's access to income allowed them to provide for their children, and rely less on husband's income to fulfill basic or daily personal and household needs. This ability has opened women's agency to pursue their basic needs. It can be argued that being able to sell their farming produce is an important indicator regarding the change in women's status in the village. Most of the women perceive that income from vegetable selling has allowed them to secure financial stability because they are able to purchase basic goods for personal and family use. For women it is a matter of pride that they are able to invest their income in well-being for one self and family, without having to depend on secondary means of finance. As a woman respondent stated:

"I did not use to sell my vegetables before, now I do. We used to take credit to support the household but now I am able to use my income in general household expenses. Nothing else could have been better than this is for us".

Decision Making:

As mentioned above, scholars such as Kabeer (1999) consider decision-making as an indicative of agency, and the capacity to influence change. In her words, agency is central to women's empowerment because it is a process through which women can make choices in her life that can be put into effect. Most women beneficiaries of the project who were interviewed reported that since they were able to earn income from their farming and selling of crops such that they are able contribute their income to the household expenses. This financial ability to provide for the household is an avenue for these women to increase their bargaining power within the household, as well as increase their capacity to negotiate and contribute to the household decisions because they are now also a provider for the family. Whereas, most women who solely make decisions are also based on small household expenses and children's decision making. Significant decisions regarding household activities are often jointly planned where husband's consultation is considered to be important. From the women's standpoint they view their ability to decide for the household as a positive aspect coupled with consultation and mutual agreement with their husband

on household matters. Women expressed that most of the time they make decisions and also consult with their husband.

There are several local women groups in the village that bring women together to create self-help groups. Not only are village women deciding to be in the group on their own, but because of it, they are able to put their concerns, opinions and ideas in the household matters as well. From women's perspective they view decision making to be a positive aspect of increased empowerment, because their ability to make or influence decisions were close to non-existent or undervalued in the past. Now that women earn, their financial ability is correlated with the increased ability to decide for their family's well-being.

One female respondent shared that:

“Before I used to sit in the corner of the house without talking but now I make decisions in my house, if there is anything lacking I contribute to decisions and how to manage our livelihood. For e.g. if we want to buy buffalo or goat, I decide and help make decisions in the house”. (Women respondent, Age 50+, former president of local women's group).

Yet, women's decisions and views in some household context are still not significant to influence all the decisions based on their livelihood. Through in person interviews, most women find themselves in a situation that even though they earn and claim that their contribution to intra household decision making is essential but in most cases not solely an important factor. While some women perceive an increase and improvement in their capacity to make decisions and contribute to plan in household matters, others perceive that they still depend on family/ or that most of the decisions are contingent upon male members in the household.

For example, one female respondent shared that her income from farming is not sufficient to fulfill household expenses therefore, she relies on her husband's income. She stated, *“My husband makes decisions in the household. Regarding the farming decisions, sometimes I also contribute to decision making”.*

Women empowerment project and the ability of women beneficiaries to earn income have resulted in increasing their agency. However, due to existing gender power relations within the community that is largely influenced by patriarchal values, the results on the improvement in decision making capacity is mixed in the village. There is a positive correlation between men and

their approach to joint decision making in the household. Yet how decisions are made and influenced is also an indicator that gender relations affect the process of decision making in the household scenario. Although men trust their wives to decide, yet from some of the interviews, it was perceived that the decisions were based on the expertise and status of the family members. Even though women stated that there is an improvement in their increased ability to make household decisions over the years, the culture of asking their husband's for their approval and opinion on important household matters is seen as a priority in most households.

Men's viewpoint on women's ability to make decisions:

Including men in the empowerment of women entails an understanding of gender roles and gender dynamics that play out in a household (Caron 2018). In the light of gender equality, equal distribution of power and influence including financial independence implies empowerment for

Box 3: Profile of Respondents. The case of Ganga, husband of a beneficiary.

Ganga Bahadur Karki is a married man in his late 50's. His wife was a former President of the Ranichuri Women's Group. He is a farmer by occupation and plants paddy, maize, cabbage, cauliflower, beans, tomatoes in his land. His daughter and son are active community mobilizers.

Karki believes that, *"the women in this village are happy to be a part of women empowerment program; women have been able to earn income through their hard work and when children ask for educational materials, mothers can also contribute equally in that matter, and husbands are also satisfied that women are able to do something on their own"*.

Interviewed on 7/19/2018

women. Interviews with men in Ranichuri village found that most of these households rely on joint decision making based on mutual discussions. It is perceived through most men's account that they allow their wives to make decisions and contribute their opinions on important household matters. Women's contribution and willingness to do something for themselves have been improved such that they farm and sell vegetables in the market to earn for their living.

Men also perceive that there has been a substantial change in women's access to income and decision-making. As one male respondent in his 50s stated:

"Before this, people only used to grow paddy and maize and they had less income from farming that was only limited to men, which was not adequate for affording

educational opportunities for their children. Such that the income was only limited to be used by men. Now women have been able to earn income through their hard work and when children ask for educational materials, mothers can also contribute equally in that matter and husbands are also satisfied that women are able to do something on their own”.

Men agreed and asserted that women are a part of decision making in the household. Some also claimed that they hand over their earning to their wives for household expenses and daily chores. One of the male respondent said that *“I support and trust my wife for her ability to make decisions”*. Most husbands view decision making as a joint priority in the household. Despite the change in decision making capacity of women, not all decisions are vested solely as her responsibility. Most important decisions rely on the consultations and men’s agreement that often requires their acceptance and opinion. Even though women are on the forefront of intra household decision making, the power relationships also play an important role on what and how decisions are made and practiced. One respondent expressed that, *“Men usually take responsibilities of what is lacking and provide support to women”*.

When women partly participate or are able to make decisions suggest that it is associated with lower levels of empowerment because minimal participation to make informed decisions will not influence women’s overall ability to influence choices and act upon them. Although women are able to make household decisions, in most cases these decisions rely or are passed on through consultation and agreement from the husbands. This indicates that few women respondents perceive that their decision needs to be informed and accepted by husbands which is an indicator of the lack of agency in women to finalize or materialize decision solely within a household scenario. Having said that, culture and social norms that are rooted in patriarchal values often limit these women to make independent choices for their families despite their increased contribution to family well-being. Male figures are often viewed as the head of households therefore, opinions from them are highly held before it is practiced. Important decisions therefore become a part and parcel of men and women’s consultation in most households.

In contrast, women view their husband’s choice in decision making as an indicator of collaborative decision making process. Contextually, Nepali culture respects adhering to family’s opinion and acceptance on any matter concerning to household decisions as important. For women

in this case, having a shared consent means an important and cooperative approach to deciding together for better household outcomes.

A woman in her 40s who was farming at the time of the interview shared that,

“I do purchase for the household but I ask and discuss with my husband on what I am doing. Everything we do is by discussing on it. We do not do anything without talking to one another. It is necessary to ask the head of the household even though I am always the one to do the decision-making”.

This is seen not only as an indicator of disempowerment, but from a socio-cultural viewpoint an adherence to the culture of respecting the view and opinion of the male member of the family, much of which can be argued as being a basis of existing gender power relations within a household and between men and women’s relationship.

Mobility of women:

Physical mobility is a strong indicator of women’s empowerment in this village. In the past, the culture and social practices have limited women’s movement to be restricted within their households in the village. They had minimal opportunities to participate in the community events or programs because of the household and care work expectations. From women’s personal account on the aspect of social norms as stated during the in-person interviews, women were accused and criticized in the past due to their movement outside of the house for long hours by some of the community or village residents. They were often called ‘uncivilized’ when they were seen to be wandering around the village or moving along in groups. Traditionally in Nepal, women’s place has been associated within the kitchen and inside a house in the rural areas.

A woman respondent shared that,

“In the past women could not go out of the house at all times, or speak face to face with their husband, and they used to behave badly with women. People used to talk behind our back and criticize us for being engaged in the community and going out of the house for various programs. They use to criticize us for being irresponsible, and comment on us of being too bossy, or blame us of going out with other people”. (Female respondent, married, in her 40’s).

Despite the socio-cultural restriction, most women in this study are now part of community groups that collectively work for women’s and community welfare. In addition, being a beneficiary of the RWEE project allows women to come out of their houses, become engaged in community

work, undertake farming and increase avenues to earn an income. They are able to build collective trust towards the community and the project. Due to the project's engagement with women, most of them feel that they are now able to participate and increase their social engagement skills. Not only did women engage in RWEE project but most of them expressed that:

"We are not held back by our husbands; we have freedom to go anywhere".

One of the participant also claimed that:

"I do my job regardless of what people say about our right to mobility". (Female respondent, married, president of local women's group, interviewed on 07/17/2018).

There is a gradual positive change seen towards viewing women's ability to exercise mobility. Women are the ones in the village to bring together programs and community meetings. These rural women also expressed that men (their spouses) have realized that there is no point for women to sit idly at women and be unproductive. They are helpful as husbands in supporting women in the household chores as well. The shift in gender roles within the household is seen as a strong indicator for increasing and supporting women's ability to exercise her right to mobility. Women in the village now are able take a stand for their right to go anywhere regardless of what other people say which is a strong indicator of their ability to make choices on movement. The president of the local women's group said: *"I do not think I have done something wrong, so I am not afraid to go out"*. Other women stated that they had seen a considerable shift in people's behavior such that women are less criticized and judged by village residents as before on the basis of their mobility or communication. They participate in the community programs and hold higher social skills and capacity than women who are not a part of the empowerment project, because they are able to earn a living.

Mohindra (2003) mentions that meetings and movements in social settings increases mobility for women, which is also evident through the account of women in the village. It is true that awareness and ability to negotiate allow women to become active in the community and boost participation.

Increase in capacity and self-esteem:

Interviewees both women and men perceive that they see a significant increase in women's social and interpersonal skills. For instance, women perceive that now they are more comfortable

to speak, share, and educate themselves on farming and food consumption practices. The women empowerment project training has allowed women to acquire skills to socialize and the ability to write and read. It has helped women to read and write their names. Those women who are uneducated feel that they can now at least write their names, understand how to sell and handle cash transactions as well as do signatures for paper works. As stated by a respondent, *“I have realized that you cannot always be dependent on your husband, but you are able to do anything and should do it, even through your household”* (woman in her 40’s).

Women those who were interviewed mentioned that they can communicate more easily than before when women were socially disengaged from community partnership. Now it has increased their confidence to socialize and strengthen their self-esteem. Women used to be submissive and afraid of social criticisms but now they are least affected by it. The empowerment training has allowed them to develop ‘power within’ themselves so that they are able to recognize that they can also farm, sell vegetables and use income to support their own livelihood. There is a shift on how women’s right to mobility has been perceived before and after the empowerment training. Participation is largely reflective of women’s increased mobility and change in social perception.

“Farming has helped me to become empowered. Projects are not going to stay in one community forever, the outcome for me is that we need to work for ourselves, now that we have got the knowledge and training, I have realized that women can do it” (Female respondent).

Participation in community groups and meetings:

Women’s involvement and engagement in skill and capacity development is an indicative of their well-being. Most women that were interviewed are also actively a part of local women’s self-help groups that provides a platform for rural women to form collective cooperatives to support their agricultural and farming livelihood practices. This has increased women’s reach to understand their abilities and practice the skills received as a beneficiary in RWEE project. Participation in the community has a positive reflection on building women’s power within themselves. According to Chiarini (2017) the RWEE program in Nepal facilitated the construction of Community Agriculture Extension Service Center (CAESC). Women in the village shared that

they were active participants in building the infrastructure, and they perceive it as an indication of collective leadership.

Women empowerment and family well-being:

Women's ability to earn and save income from their farming has proved to be a positive indicator for the well-being of their family, particularly their children. Firstly, their nutrition and dietary diversity has improved. Better farming and access to seeds and crops has diversified crop farming and production such that women are able to provide nutritious food to their families. Secondly, with the income from women's farming production, they are able to use it for their children's education. Most of the women who were interviewed expressed that they are now able to invest more on their children's education and supplies, be able to buy them textbooks as per the need without always relying on their husband's income. A woman respondent expressed, *"I am able to support my children and educate them, buy them notebooks and invest in household purchases"*.

Men's view on the well-being of the family:

In addition, men also share a similar perception on family well-being. Their positive outlook towards women empowerment suggest that if women are empowered they will be able to save income for themselves, which she can invest in her children when in need. Men are more welcoming and cognizant about the impact and improvement brought by the project, therefore, they tend to support their wives.

As one married male respondent of around age 50 noted:

"It is very much better than before because women can now do their farming business. Now they believe that selling vegetables is beneficial. In addition, it has helped to educate, clothe and feed our children as well as celebrate festivities".

Gender Equality: Men's changing perceptions to support women's empowerment:

Most men assert that the RWEE project helped their wives to come forward, educate themselves in farming business and earn for their livelihood. There is a growing support from men for the improvement on women's status in the village. The respondents claim that there is greater social harmony since the project has allowed their wives to receive trainings and earn income. As men stated, *"without collaboration nothing will work"*. Most of the husbands that were being

interviewed claimed that collaboration and support increases a favorable environment for men and women to work together. They believe that all work cannot be done by men or women alone. Therefore, women's participation in the house and the community is gradually being incorporated and encouraged in the village. Men view empowered women as independent, wise and informed and this is reflective of most of the changes they have seen in the women of the village.

What is empowered?

The study explored local men's and women's perception and understanding of the concept of empowerment. Women describe an empowered woman as a person who is motivated to move ahead in her life, active, can earn their own income, outspoken, able to work, and does not want to be dominated by men or family members. More specifically, a woman respondent noted that an empowered woman is,

“Someone who gives to others rather than ask for a living. Empowered women are someone who is capable of and inspires others to be the same, to teach others in doing things in the right manner and encourage them to earn for themselves”.

Similarly, the characteristics of an empowered women as perceived by men are, empowered woman is someone who is good, honest and trustworthy, someone who has positive change in their behavior, who are able to support their family occupation and be independent; strong and open about their thoughts. The local meaning of empowerment is constructed on the ideals of how the village residents perceived change in women to be. It is also tied to the aspect of moral values that are culturally held within this context which are valued by the respondents.

Discussion

The change in the household dynamics on decision making and women's income generation from farming and training has improved over time. There is a positive correlation between women's increased agency and men's willingness to support their wives to engage in productive activities. This is reflected in the shift of household dynamics of decision making, from solely men to jointly men and women, and ability to earn income both by women and men together. In contrast to the past where women in the village had limited roles to farming, working and earning, the RWEE training has built a social network among women to actively engage in the community and household. One reason is that RWEE project implementation allowed women to

come together, form social women groups and work collectively to gain farming skills and knowledge in order to generate income. The farming and livestock training allowed women to navigate potential ways to farm and sell their produce. This in turn has added a sense of productive responsibility on women, which is also recognized by men in their respective household, such that they view their wives' ability to earn income as a positive reinforcement for empowerment.

In addition to the RWEE training, community programs and support from men and husbands of the beneficiaries has contributed in helping women to build their agency. It has become a medium for women to prosper, but also put themselves independently out in their communities to advance themselves economically and socially. In this regard, Malhotra et al, (2002) states that the resources are enabling factors that drive empowerment. Training, women's community leadership roles in women's groups, farming skills, income and ability to communicate, read and write has been the fundamental attributes and resources that women are able to build over time to empower themselves.

Furthermore, men's awareness of women's empowerment and skill building has created positive outcomes on their perceptions. When it comes to understanding women's agency in household and in the community, in particular with making important decisions with men, the responses from few participants elicited mixed views, however mostly positive. Most of the finding and interaction identified that men's belief and perception on the experiences with RWEE project to an extent was shaped by their positive aspirations for their wives and family. Men in particular assert their views that women need to be empowered and they also view their wife's ability to earn as a positive aspect of change. Most men believe that the household decisions should also be based on joint consensus. The presence of a liberal and positive attitude was reflected in most of the men's understanding of the need for women to be empowered.

However, some of the findings from the study also entail that few women do not have the same support from their husbands because they are not able to exercise decision making independently which is related to her unequal bargaining power vis-a-vis men in the household, because few men within households deliberately exercised control over all decisions. Social norms that exist within the Nepali society elicit that women often are obliged to take permission or at least allow men's agreement on decisions to be implemented which is also evident in the literature

which states that women are generally considered to be dependent members of households (Kabeer 1999) and to men. Even though women are able to exercise agency over their household decision making on small purchases and children's well-being, however in cases where major household decisions are to be made is held and influenced by male members of the family. The concept of bread winner and head of household including the social norms prevalent in Nepal often influence the way women practice their agency alongside men. The dominant view of masculinity is reflected in perception of few men in regards to the rights of women to exercise equal power within the household, which also indicate that gender norms and unequal power relations are prevalent. This is reflective of the persistent gender realities that exist in their household, where it is evident that the attitude of male members is resistant and neutral to their wife's attempt to become more socially, economically and personally empowered. At the same time, it indicates that the process of change in social values and mindset take time. In majority, men are aware about women's development and the support within and outside of household is evident. However, they still feel that gender inequality and violence against women is still prevalent in some parts of the village.

On a positive note, most households encourage women to participate actively in economic and community activities. The belief that men need to encourage instead of discouraging women is evident in most of the participants of the study.

The decisions made within the household regarding income, children's education, well-being and purchase of goods mostly depend upon a joint consultation between husband and wife. Several studies such as of Quisumbing (2003) states that in Sub Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America researchers claim that families prosper when women acquire higher status. Therefore, women's access to better health, education and household autonomy increases the chances of her children's well-being (World Bank, 2007; 110). Nonetheless, most households allow women to do the decision making because of their role as homemakers. The impact of skill training in farming has also allowed women of the village to sell their farming produce to generate their own income.

In totality, despite few households still have pertinent unequal gender relations, however most of the participants feel that there is greater aspect of gender equality within the village. Most husbands encourage their wives to engage in community work, and also support them in their

household chores. In contrast to the past where women's mobility was questioned, it is now almost never criticized. Likewise, women are able to better read and write their names, speak more often with community's residents and outsiders and buy extra supplies for their children's education. The improvement in women's self-esteem is reflective in their ability to improve their livelihood through an increased income generation and well-being of their family members including their own confidence that they are able to achieve and earn, which was once never realized due to gender discrimination against women. Study participants, both men and women emphasized that they took part in community programs which directly benefited them, and they are eager to learn skill sets that improve their livelihood trajectory.

Conclusion

For farming households in Nepal whose livelihoods are based on agriculture, the RWEE project has the potential to increase women's productive choices in farming, well-being and personal autonomy that improve and support their livelihood growth. This study found that the women perceive the project recognized their strengths and practical needs in farming to generate income and helped to leverage their skills into making productive choices for themselves including their families.

In the annual consolidated report on RWEE (Chiarini, 2016) mentions that, 'In early 2016, the JP RWEE began working with Chandra and other small holder women farmers in Ranichuri and elsewhere in Nepal, to help them improve their agricultural productivity and food and nutrition security, while also increasing their income'. This in turn became an avenue for women to enhance their employability through farming, which in the past was mostly recognized as unpaid labor. Income through vegetable farming and selling improved farming skills and exposure to better means of income generation enhanced women's self-confidence, self-esteem and their willingness to involve in productive activities. Women are now able to support their children's welfare especially in education and nutrition. The ability to invest in children's school supplies and dietary practices is transformed by the ability of women to earn income. Their financial status elevated their ability to decide on small purchases for the household on their own choice.

The account of personal reflections published by UNDP in the RWEE Annual Progress Report (2016) also report a woman beneficiary's personal experiences from Ranichuri village, which resonate with the findings of this study, which states that

“I am so happy that he (husband) is helping me both in my household chores and in farm”
(Chiraini, 2016: 39).

Despite substantial improvements in the women's status in the village, the traditional gender power relations at the household and community level partially remain. However, despite men are aware and have participated in the project, the process and experiences of change are not the same for few women in their households, who do not have equal support from men. Projects that aim to empower rural women need to incorporate and engage men to alter and shift gender inequalities within the household and institutional structures. Men and women bring unique abilities to improve livelihoods and their engagement in development activities will likely shift their perceptions to alter traditional gender division of labor and roles that define their identities in rural livelihoods.

Nonetheless, in general, men in the village have a positive outlook toward women's changing status and increase capabilities to earn and become empowered. Yet, there is also a perception that, gender inequality in some households still exist. Although women's position in the household and community is elevated, gendered structures remain pertinent in various facets of the village life. While this paper demonstrates that the RWEE project brought substantial changes to how men and women perceive women's empowerment, barriers to women's overall development remain not just at the community level, but also at a national level that could be addressed. Women's need in Nepal has to be emphasized in terms of contextualized understanding of gender dynamics, norms and requires effective gender responsive monitoring systems both in the community and national level gender equality and empowerment instruments. In conclusion, quoting Pudasaini (2015: 125), it is imperative that, ‘to ensure women's equality in economic opportunities and development outcomes, it is critical that women's contributions to the national wellbeing and sustainable development through their household and care work must be measured, recognized and integrated into the development planning process in a systematic manner’.

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Appendix

In-person interview questionnaire:

<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
<p>How would you describe your occupation: Farmer, Government employee, Private employee, Own business, Other income generating sources?</p> <p>What is your main source of income?</p>	<p>How would you describe your occupation: Farmer, Government Employee, Private Employee, Own business, Other income generating sources?</p> <p>What is your main source of income?</p>
<p>When you hear the word, 'women empowerment' what are the first words that come to your mind?</p>	<p>When you hear the word, 'women empowerment' what are the first words that come to your mind?</p>
<p>Do you feel that men should be a part of the women empowerment process? Do you think men were also a part of this project?</p>	<p>Women empowerment is does not happen in vacuum? How do you perceive this?</p>
<p>What are the characteristics of a 'respectable' or a 'good' woman?</p>	<p>What are the characteristics of a 'respectable' or a 'good' woman?</p>
<p>In your opinion what are the qualities of an empowered woman? And how can women be empowered while being what is considered a 'good' woman?</p>	<p>In your opinion what are the qualities of an empowered woman? And how can women be empowered while being what is considered a 'good' woman?</p>
<p>In your household, who normally makes decisions about family life and finance?</p> <p>Do you make decisions in the households? If so on which aspects?</p>	<p>In your household, who normally makes decisions about family life and finance?</p> <p>Do you allow your wife/ consult with wife to make decisions? If so, on which aspects?</p>
<p>If you want to buy anything for the household, do you have to consult with your husband or family? Do you have a say in whether to purchase major goods on your household?</p>	<p>Does your wife need to ask you to spend money? If so, in what contexts does she ask you?</p>

<p>What household chores do you do?</p> <p>What household chores does your husband do?</p> <p>To what extent do you think it has changed after the project?</p>	<p>What household chores do you do?</p> <p>What household chores does your wife do?</p> <p>To what extent do you think it has changed after the project?</p>
<p>Do you feel comfortable giving your opinion about household decisions in the presence of your husband? (or any other family member?)</p>	<p>What is your view on your wife contributing in giving opinion about household decisions in your presence or among any other family member in decisions?</p>
<p>How often do you participate in community events and meetings?</p>	<p>How often do you and your wife participate in community events and meetings?</p>
<p>What skills or change have you experienced after being a beneficiary of the project?</p>	<p>How do you perceive the change of the project on women in the village and in your wife and the household culture?</p>
<p>How do you think the overall dynamics of your household have changed during and after the project?</p> <p>Was participation in the project meaningful to you? If yes, could you provide me with an example of a time when you felt that your participation was meaningful?</p>	<p>What is overall household dynamics during and after the project? Do you think it was meaningful?</p> <p>Was participation in the project meaningful to you and your wife? If yes, could you provide me with an example of a time when you felt that your participation was meaningful?</p>