

Transforming gender relations in the trail bridge programme in Nepal

Key policy recommendations

- ▶ Many strides towards gender responsiveness have been made under Nepal's trail bridge programme. Nevertheless, as a signatory to CEDAW (the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women), the **Nepal government has made a commitment to gender transformation by eliminating all forms of discrimination**. This will require policy and legal reforms truly reflecting equal rights and opportunities for men and women, in order for the trail bridge programme to contribute to such a transformation.
- ▶ **Diversity in user groups:** The 40% quota for women in user bridge committees should be increased to 50% under the guidelines, in line with the provisions of the new Constitution of Nepal. It should be made mandatory that one of the key positions, chair or secretary, is held by a woman, and disadvantaged groups are proportionally represented. A composition representative of local diversity should be the aim.
- ▶ Future guidelines should recognise **women's unpaid care** burden as a factor limiting their engagement in trail bridges and seek to reduce and redistribute it through good community facilitation by local NGOs. Appropriate mechanisms include provision for child care, requiring a commitment of support from families, labour saving technologies and devices and enforcing adequate advance notice and convenient timing of meetings. Local NGOs are best placed to facilitate this.
- ▶ A more **systematic offer of leadership training to women and men** user committee members should be introduced. This should include a follow-up second offer for those individuals who are unable to attend the first course. Local NGOs should be required to monitor all training provided, and ensure that all key persons are included.
- ▶ The **local NGOs** responsible for facilitating the trail bridge programme should be required to report on **the quality of user committees** and user group functioning, not merely on quantitative technical indicators. Appropriate social indicators should be determined through a consultative process with the NGOs concerned, and payment for social facilitation should be based upon them.
- ▶ Greater focus should be placed on supporting **better wages for women**. In part this could be achieved through integrating a skills training component into the community-based approach, so that women labourers can become classified as skilled artisans. The timing of training and the support facilities must be appropriate to women's other roles.

- ▶ It is recommended that **the job description and salary of bridge wardens is reviewed**, to check that remuneration is commensurate with the tasks entailed. Furthermore, a monitoring system should be established to generate clear information on what bridge maintenance work actually entails.
- ▶ Greater **coordination should be encouraged between the government bodies** mandated with technical functions and those mandated with social functions at district level. This is important to build into the new federal structure of Nepal from the beginning, ideally also with clear provision for the voice of the local community – the bridge users.
- ▶ Gender mainstreaming and community inclusion **requirements and practices are inadequate for contractors implementing long span trail bridges and need reviewing**.

Summary of Project/Background

Transforming gender relations in the trail bridge programme in Nepal study was conducted by HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation on behalf of ReCAP. It covered an analysis of legal provisions, consultations with key stakeholders, and field visits to ten trail bridges. These comprised three short span bridges (under 120 m) in each of the districts of Arghakanchi, Darchula and Morang, and one long span trail bridge (over 120 m) in Kaski district. Additional interviews with some other women user committee members were also made. Whilst these policy recommendations are based on a limited, although carefully selected sample of trail bridges, they are given weight by their endorsement at a national level workshop with relevant stakeholders, and the long-standing practical experience of HELVETAS in supporting Nepal's trail bridge programme.

Figure 1: Women using Tunibote Trail Bridge, Salyan



Brief problem summary

Mainstreaming gender within the trail bridge sub-sector is outlined in the Trail Bridge Strategy 2006 and the corresponding policy documents: the Trail Bridge Sector Wide Approach Framework-I (2009-2014) and the Trail Bridge Sector Wide Approach Framework-II (2014-2019). These policy documents are in line with the Local Self Governance Act (1999) and focus primarily on short span trail bridges with the engagement of women and disadvantaged groups through participation in users' committees and in employment opportunities during trail bridge construction.

Past studies indicate that trail bridges play an essential role in reducing poverty, as their construction creates jobs, improves access to education, health, markets and also reduces women's workloads. Eventually, it contributes towards an overall benefit to the local and national economy through the creation of employment and opportunities for both women and men. However, the correlation between trail bridges and some of their benefits are indirect and are not always clear and attributable, particularly with regard to those that take a gendered lens. This is important, as gender inequality is a huge challenge in Nepal.

The policy framework in Nepal as related to infrastructure and the rights of women and disadvantaged groups provides considerable scope for both participation and the enjoyment of benefits. The 2015 Constitution of Nepal makes even stronger demands in this regard; as a consequence, various commitments need to be updated. Nonetheless, there is still room for further policy improvements towards a more gender transformative agenda. There is a need to think creatively about encouraging the greater engagement of women of all social groups in trail bridge planning, construction, maintenance and use, with the goal of transformative change in gender relations. In addition, whilst government policies are explicit about gender aspects regarding the community approach for short span trail bridges, they are silent with regard to the contracting approach used in Long Span Trail Bridges.

Most relevant evidence: Quotas for women

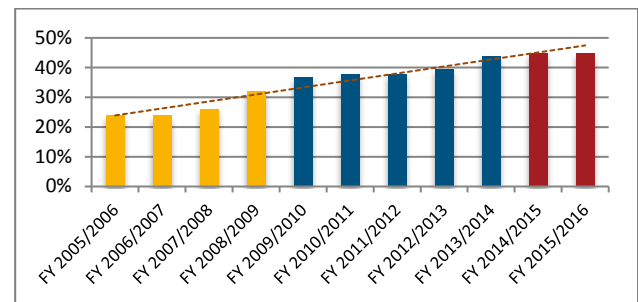
"The traditional view towards women is changing as they are in a key position in any committee." Pranita Rai, Adardaha Bridge user, Morang.

Data gathered under the trail bridge strategy information system shows that in most cases there are at least 40% women in the user committees, and at least one woman in an executive position - most commonly that of

treasurer. This was reported to be because women are perceived to be more trustworthy than men. Field interviews confirmed that quotas for women – and for disadvantaged groups - are widely known and accepted as a means to ensure that their voices are heard. At the same time, women's participation can be undermined and/or exploited if not backed by other measures – notably ensuring that women have adequate time to participate, and the skills and confidence to speak out.

Amongst the case study bridges there were two examples of all-women user committees. In neither were the women highly empowered. Depending on the awareness and knowledge of the women concerned, women-only committees can be used as a means for others to exert control "behind the scenes".

Figure 2: Women's Representation in User Committees (2005-2016)



Time required for women's unpaid care work

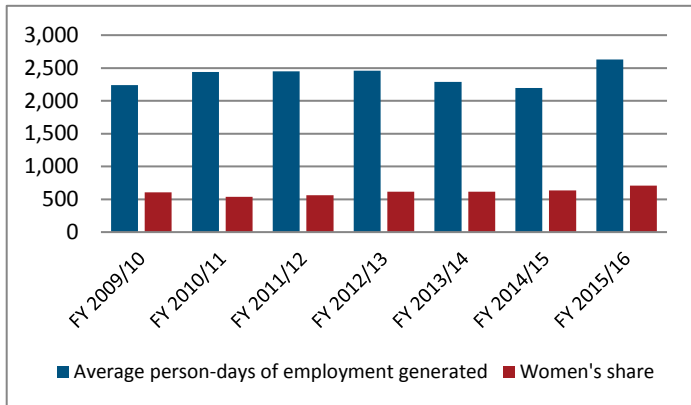
"Sometimes I would get up at 4am to ensure that I completed all my domestic chores such as cleaning the house, feeding the cattle and cooking food, in order to make it to the users' committee meetings." Sita Parajuli, Ex- users' committee member of Kakahare Bridge, Kaski.

Roles and responsibilities remain strongly gender-determined in rural Nepal, with women being expected to undertake many unpaid care tasks. With the existing high rate of male labour migration, often husbands are absent, which can result in there being no one to share these tasks, even if willing.

Women's unpaid care work is in direct competition with time required for engagements outside the home. In the case studies, the women who had participated most successfully in trail bridge activities had been actively supported in so doing by their families. Of these women, those living in extended families were often helped by female relatives; others reported husbands helping in order to allow them to attend meetings. This redistribution of unpaid care tasks was the most commonly reported occurrence, although user committee sensitivity to women's time poverty, in organising meetings when convenient for women, was also important. Conversely,

arranging meetings at short notice was perceived, and in some cases clearly used, as a way to exclude women.

Figure 3: Local employment generation per bridge due to construction



Social facilitation of trail bridge building

“We make sure that there is involvement of women in the committee and also in one of the executive positions at the time of planning. During construction and maintenance, we also make sure that poor people and women get the opportunity of labour.” Purna Bahadur Mahar, President, Social Welfare Society, Darchula.

Both social and technical facilitation is, under the current guidelines, the responsibility of a local NGO. However, while these NGOs appear to be aware of their responsibilities, they generally place far greater emphasis on technical rather than social issues. One reason is that the current monitoring system, which is also the basis on which they are paid, focuses on technical aspects. The monitoring of social aspects is limited to user committee composition, opportunities for labour, and the establishment of transparency mechanisms (such as public hearings and audits). The quality of participation in decision-making within the established structures, including the extent to which women and disadvantaged groups are able to exert their agency (influence), is not assessed.

Leadership training for women and men

“The training boosted my confidence and made me more aware of my rights and duties. I gained knowledge and skills with regard to trail bridges and leadership, which has helped me to be a strong person - especially in taking decisions...” Samni Sada, Community Leadership training participant and users’ committee Treasurer, Ranipokhari Trail Bridge, Sunsari.

Community Leadership training is offered to user committee members through the Trail Bridge Support Unit

(TBSU), but not all eligible individuals have been able to participate due to timings that clashed with other commitments, family restrictions on mobility, incompatible care responsibilities, and similar reasons. Amongst those who have attended the training, there was wide appreciation. Respondents also noted that it is useful for men to participate and be sensitised to the importance of including women.

Improving women’s wages

Although the principle of equal pay for equal work seems to be generally known and usually respected, there is a gender difference in the level of skills, and thus wages, of labourers. Women are employed as unskilled; only men tend to be classed as skilled labourers. No specific training programme exists to give women the competencies that would class them as skilled artisans.

“The bridge has made everyone’s life easier, and once they began to notice how much hard work is required to maintain it, they [previously condescending local people] changed their stance. Now they say, ‘so much effort goes into this, you should ask for a rise!’” Sangita Ghimire, bridge warden, Adarsha Bridge, Morang.

On trail bridge completion, a bridge warden is appointed to supervise maintenance, for an annual salary of NPR 6,000 (approx. US\$ 60). The guidelines stipulate that preference should be given to a disadvantaged woman, on the assumption that the task is of benefit to the incumbent. However, testimonies from women wardens indicated that although many take pride in their work, they spend considerable time and effort in maintenance activities, for which the salary is very little reward.

Timely wage payments to avoid debt

“We were paid after 14 days, which made it difficult for me as I incurred debt!” Sunita Sherpa, Labourer, Faklandtapu bridge, Morang/Sunsari.

Figure 4: Sunita Sherpa, Morang



At present, payment for community-based construction work is made on the basis of certified progress. That is, the labourers must work for a substantial number of days before they get paid. This is usually at least 14 days, and quite often more. For those who are living in precarious financial circumstances, it is not possible to survive this period without a loan. Given that local short term interest rates can be up to 5% per month (i.e. 60% per annum), this can make a significant cut into their eventual earnings. By contrast, contractors engaged in constructing long span bridges are afforded an advance on the award of contract. It seems odd that user groups are not treated similarly under the community-based approach. Although the principle of equal pay for equal work seems to be generally known and usually respected, there is a gender difference in the level of skills, and thus wages, of labourers.

Provision for gender-responsive community construction in long span bridges

Provision is made in the guidelines for long-span bridges to be constructed by contractors as they are more technically complicated than shorter bridges. Whilst this is fully logical, it seems strange that contractors are not required to conduct any community consultation, nor to be gender-responsive in any way. In the one long span bridge included in the study, this had left local people confused, especially as there had been a user committee for an earlier, shorter bridge – so there was an awareness of the community-based approach.

Figure 5: The Kusma Gyabi long span trail bridge



Co-ordination at district level

There appears to be little co-ordination between the different government bodies that have a stake in the trail bridge programme, particularly between those mandated with technical functions such as the District Technical Office, and those mandated with social functions such as

the WDO (Women Development Office). The latter expressed particular isolation, although being informed is also a two-way process, in that WDO staff have a right to attend monthly district meetings and hear about on-going development activities.

“I have no idea about it [gender provisions in trail bridge construction] because no one invites me in this type of activity.” Bishnu Maya Paudel, WDO, Darchula.

Conclusions

It is natural that a focus is given to technical aspects of trail bridge programme implementation, given that the success of a bridge stands on technical criteria. Social aspects of community-based trail bridge construction have thus been relegated to secondary consideration, even though the link between sound community ownership and good subsequent maintenance is well recognised. The important contribution of trail bridges to overall rural development is also being limited to less than its full potential by failing to support women’s empowerment in an adequate manner with concrete and encompassing policy provisions and processes in place. Though the policy and guidelines for the trail bridge programme may be considered gender responsive and socially inclusive, implementation of the guidelines, with a clear gender perspective, often fell short of expectations. Thus, a rethinking of current available policies is required to align with progressive provisions of CEDAW and the Constitution of Nepal, and current field practice, to render it truly gender responsive and ultimately gender transformative.

Figure 6: A trail bridge in Morang built by all-women user committee



References or further information sources

MoFALD, 2012. *Guidelines for formulation, operation and management of Users’ Committees, Government of Nepal, Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development, Kathmandu, Nepal 6p.* Available at: http://mofald.gov.np/sites/default/files/Resources/docs_51.pdf